

**WISDOM AND *UBUNTU*:  
A CLOSE READING OF PROVERBS 1 - 9 IN DIALOGUE WITH  
AFRICAN *UBUNTU***

by  
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## DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

Signature:

Date:



## ABSTRACT

The aim of this dissertation is to demonstrate that a dialogue can be established between wisdom in Proverbs 1 – 9 and *ubuntu*. This dialogue becomes evident from a close reading of Proverbs 1 – 9 and from a study of the correspondence between the worldviews found in ancient Israel and Africa respectively.

*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* is a Zulu saying that has its equivalent in nearly every sub-Saharan culture. Briefly, it translates to: “A human being is a human being because of (other) human beings.” This points to a uniquely African view of human beings. This communal emphasis is also found within the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. The sages of the Old Testament attach great importance to harmony in the community and strongly emphasise obedience to wisdom as a way of accomplishing this harmony.

The dialogue between wisdom and *ubuntu* is especially challenging from an academic point of view. On the one hand, wisdom highlights valuable aspects of African ways of life, principles and ideas that are often overlooked or ignored. On the other hand, *ubuntu* holds the promise of a nonwestern tradition that has been misread and marginalised in history, but that is reclaiming its place.

A close reading is used to interpret the particular words, images and organisation of the scenes or passages in Proverbs 1 – 9. The interaction between the worldviews of ancient Israel and Africa leads us to further conclusions, identifying gaps in our knowledge and pointing to directions that could be followed in hermeneutics of which scholars have been unaware up to now. It also helps to sharpen the focus on wisdom by suggesting new perspectives of interpretation. The dialogue between wisdom and *ubuntu* leads us to fresh, exciting insights and a deeper understanding of issues that are of central concern in the field of wisdom theology research.

In Proverbs 1 – 9, wisdom theology is redefined from an *ubuntu* perspective. The dialogue between wisdom and *ubuntu* thus leads us to a new development within wisdom

theology. It helps us appreciate the new emphasis on communality. This does not happen in isolation. *יְרֵאָה יְהוָה* is identified as the primal source of wisdom. It must be regarded, however, in combination with the emphasis on living in communion with others. The essence of the new understanding – an existential understanding of wisdom – leads us towards appreciating the interrelatedness between human beings.

Creation theology can be understood as deed/consequence theology, where the intimate relationship between experiencing divine awe and living in communion with others becomes evident. The dialogue between wisdom and *ubuntu* redefines the deed/consequence or causality aspect of wisdom theology as the “goal” of the wise.

It is not the aim of this dissertation to copy some previously developed theological approach from one context into another, but rather to stimulate creative hermeneutical thinking with regard to African views on Old Testament wisdom literature. In this study we come to the conclusion that Afrocentric hermeneutics has the potential to be more responsive to the context of the Old Testament wisdom literature than Western theological exegesis has been.

## OPSOMMING

Die oogmerk van hierdie proefskrif is om aan te dui dat daar 'n dialoog bestaan tussen wysheid in Spreuke 1 – 9 in die Ou Testament en die Afrikakonsep *ubuntu*. Hierdie dialoog word duidelik wanneer 'n mens Spreuke 1 – 9 noukeurig lees en wanneer jy die ooreenkomste bestudeer tussen die verskillende wêreldbeelde wat in antieke Israel en Afrika aangetref word.

*Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu* is 'n Zoeloegesegde waarvoor gelyksoortige begrippe in feitlik elke Afrikakultuur suid van die Sahara bestaan. Dit kan vertaal word as: “'n Mens is 'n mens as gevolg van (ander) mense.” Dit dui op 'n unieke Afrika-wêreldbeeld. Hierdie klem op die lewe in gemeenskap vind ons ook in die wysheidsliteratuur van die Ou Testament. Die Ou-Testamentiese wysheidsleraars heg groot waarde aan harmonie binne die gemeenskap en rig 'n sterk appél tot gehoorsaamheid aan die wysheid om harmonie te bewerkstellig.

Die dialoog tussen wysheid en *ubuntu* bied 'n groot uitdaging veral vanuit 'n akademiese perspektief. Aan die een kant beklemtoon wysheid talle waardevolle aspekte van die Afrikaleefwyse, -beginsels en -idees wat dikwels misgekyk word. Aan die ander kant kry die konsep *ubuntu* sy regmatige plek binne die verstaan van 'n nuwesterse tradisie wat dikwels in die verlede gemarginaliseer is.

'n Noukeurige lees van die teks van Spreuke 1 – 9 word gebruik om sekere begrippe en parafrases beter te verstaan. Die interaksie tussen die wêreldbeelde van antieke Israel en Afrika lei daartoe dat nuwe denkrigtings in die hermeneutiek, wat tot op hede nog nie ontgin is nie, geïdentifiseer word.

Die dialoog tussen wysheid en *ubuntu* bied dus aan navorsers 'n instrument om Spreuke 1 – 9 vanuit 'n nuwe hermeneutiese perspektief te lees. Die interaksie tussen die verskillende wêreldbeelde van antieke Israel en Afrika lei tot verdere konklusies; leemtes in ons verstaan en vertolking word byvoorbeeld uitgewys. Verder bied dit nuwe



perspektiewe op die veld van die interpretasie van wysheid. Die dialoog tussen wysheid en *ubuntu* lei tot nuwe, opwindende insig en 'n beter verstaan van kwessies wat binne die navorsing oor wysheidsteologie van belang is.

Die wysheidsteologie in Spreuke 1 – 9 word geherdefinieer vanuit 'n *ubuntu*-perspektief. Die dialoog tussen wysheid en *ubuntu* lei dus tot 'n nuwe ontwikkeling binne die wysheidsteologie. Dit stel ons in staat om die klem op gemeenskaplikheid beter te verstaan. Hierdie nuwe verstaan vind egter nie in isolasie plaas nie. יְרֵאָה יְהוָה is steeds die vertrekpunt vir die verstaan van wysheid. Die bogenoemde dialoog kan beter verstaan word deur die klem wat gelê word op die lewe in gemeenskap met andere. Die kern van hierdie nuwe verstaan – 'n eksistensiële verstaan van wysheid – bring in ons 'n groter bewuswording van die onderlinge verbondenheid tussen mense.

Skeppingsteologie kan verstaan word as oorsaak/gevolg-teologie, waar die noue verhouding tussen ontsag vir God en lewe in verbondenheid met andere duidelik word. Die dialoog tussen wysheid en *ubuntu* herdefinieer die oorsaak/gevolg- of kousaliteitsaspek van wysheidsteologie as die “doel” van die wysheidsleraar.

Die doel van hierdie proefskrif is nie om 'n teologiese benadering vanuit een konteks op 'n ander een van toepassing te maak nie, maar eerder om kreatiewe hermeneutiese denke te stimuleer aangaande Afrikaperspektiewe op Ou-Testamentiese wysheidsliteratuur. Deur hierdie studie kom ons tot die gevolgtrekking dat Afrosentriese hermeneutiek die potensiaal het om 'n beter verstaan tot die konteks van Ou-Testamentiese wysheidsliteratuur te bied as wat Westerse teologiese eksegeese kon.

## BEDANKING EN ERKENNING

Alhoewel ek hierdie proefskrif in Engels geskryf het ter wille van die breër akademiese gesprek en *ubuntu* konteks, gee ek graag in my moedertaal erkenning aan my Hemelse Vader en aan spesifieke persone:

Hierdie proefskrif is die kulminasie van net meer as sewe jaar se navorsing en studies by die Universiteit van Stellenbosch. Sedert 1998 is ek voltyds in gemeente bediening as predikant en dit het tot die gevolg gehad dat ek nie hierdie proefskrif vroeër kon voltooi nie. Nogtans het ek oor die afgelope paar jaar in die bediening, deur hierdie studies en in die lewe soveel nuwe dinge geleer oor myself en oor God. Ek wil daarom heel eerste vir my Hemelse Vader, my Verlosser Jesus Christus en die Heilige Gees eer en dankie sê vir Sy liefde, krag en sorg in hierdie tyd en vir ewig.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### CHAPTER 1: The identification and delineation of the problem

1.1 Problem	1
1.2 Hypothesis	7
1.3 Methodology	8
1.4 Outline	11

### CHAPTER 2: *Ubuntu* as worldview in Africa

2.1 Introduction	14
2.2 Defining <i>ubuntu</i>	17
2.3 <i>Ubuntu</i> as worldview	20
2.4 The religious community	24
2.4.1 <i>Ubuntu</i> : the physical viewpoint	26
2.4.2 <i>Ubuntu</i> : the financial and economical field	26
2.4.3 <i>Ubuntu</i> : welfare and social concepts	29
2.4.4 <i>Ubuntu</i> : education, respect and obedience	30
2.5 Examples of wisdom and <i>ubuntu</i> as seen in African Proverbs	33
2.5.1 <i>Chinjeru chendi ndamwene.</i>	34
2.5.2 <i>Boza liwele mweneko.</i>	34
2.5.3 <i>Mazu gha wala ghayanana ndi sabora wakali mweniyo wawawa cha.</i>	34
2.6 A preliminary conclusion	35

### CHAPTER 3: Wisdom as worldview in wisdom literature

3.1 Introduction	38
3.2 Defining wisdom	42



3.3 The correspondence between the call to wisdom in Deuteronomy and Wisdom literature	44
3.4 Wisdom as worldview	49
3.5 Wisdom as worldview and the religious community	51
3.6 Wisdom and worldview in Job	55
3.7 Wisdom and worldview in Proverbs	64
3.7.1 Family wisdom	68
3.7.2 Court wisdom	68
3.7.3 Theological wisdom	70
3.7.4 Fear of the Lord	70
3.7.5 Personification of wisdom and folly	71
3.8 Wisdom and worldview in Qohelet	73
3.9 A Preliminary Conclusion: Wisdom's worldview – establishing a dialogue with African <i>ubuntu</i>	83

## **CHAPTER 4: Close reading of Proverbs 1, 8 & 9**

4.1 Introduction	90
4.2 The parental legacy in Proverbs 1-9	91
4.3 Close reading of wisdom in Proverbs 1, 8 & 9	95
4.4 Structure and composition of Proverbs 1	96
4.4.1 The purpose of the book 1:2-6	102
4.4.2 The thesis of the book 1:7	104
4.4.3 The Parental Instructions – Prov 1:8-9	106
4.4.4 Warning against consorting with sinners 1:10-19	107
4.4.5 Wisdom's appeal 1:20-33	110
4.4.6 Theological assumption: Instruction, obedience and the influence on the community	117
4.5 Structure and composition of Proverbs 8	119
4.5.1 The function of wisdom in Proverbs 8	119
4.5.2 Wisdom as guide - Prov 8:1-3	120



4.5.3 Wisdom in Prov 8:4-7	121
4.5.4 Wisdom's providential rule - Prov 8:12-21	123
4.5.5 Wisdom's place in creation - Prov 8:22-31	126
4.5.6 The appeal to gain wisdom 8:32-36	129
4.5.7 Theological assumption: Instruction, obedience and the influence on the community	131
4.6 Structure and composition of Proverbs 9	133
4.6.1 Wisdom and folly contrasted - chapter 9	133
4.6.2 Wisdom's feast 9:1-6	136
4.6.3 Wisdom in Proverbs 9:7-12	137
4.6.4 Follies feast 9:13-18	141
4.6.5 Theological assumption: Instruction, obedience and the influence on the community	144
4.7 A preliminary conclusion	146

## **CHAPTER 5: Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9 in dialogue with *ubuntu***

5.1. Introduction	155
5.2. The assumptions of Old Testament wisdom and <i>ubuntu</i>	157
5.2.1 The central organising idea of wisdom	159
5.2.2 The motivation for Old Testament wisdom	160
5.2.3 Guidelines for moral interpretation of the Old Testament	161
5.3. Wisdom in dialogue with <i>ubuntu</i>	163
5.4. The "obedient" approach to wisdom and <i>ubuntu</i>	170
5.4.1 The search for a new moral standing from wisdom and <i>ubuntu</i>	172
5.4.2 Beyond Proverbs 1-9: <i>Ubuntu</i> amidst corruption	175
5.4.3 The way of the individual	177
5.5. The wise person	179
5.5.1 "God created man in his own image. Male and female he created them."	179

5.5.2 God is father	179
5.5.3 God is righteous	180
5.5.4 God is love	180
5.5.5 God is compassionate and generous	180
5.5.6 God is a worker	181
5.5.7 God speaks	181
5.5.8 God is sovereign.	181
5.6 The relationship between African and Old Testament Proverbs	181
5.7 A Preliminary Conclusion	185

## CHAPTER 6: Conclusion

6.1 Wisdom in dialogue with <i>ubuntu</i> : a new interaction	188
6.2 Criticism of <i>ubuntu</i>	190
6.3 The hypothesis of this study and new hermeneutical insights	191
6.4 The contribution of this dissertation to the study of Proverbs and Old Testament theology	194
6.5 Enabling the church in Africa in articulating wisdom and <i>ubuntu</i>	196
6.6 Wisdom and <i>ubuntu</i> : an open-ended and ongoing process	198
Addendum: Topics for further research	200
<b>Bibliography</b>	201

## CHAPTER 1: The identification and delineation of the problem

### 1.1 Problem

This dissertation is concerned with the problems regarding a dialogue between wisdom in Old Testament Proverbs 1-9 and the African notion of *Ubuntu*. These problems can be formulated by the following questions:

- “Does the traditional African concept *ubuntu* share any features with wisdom as found in the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament?”
- “Could a dialogue be established between wisdom in Proverbs 1-9 and *ubuntu*?”
- “If a dialogue could be established, how does such an understanding contribute to the discipline of Old Testament theology?”

As is evident from the title, this dissertation concerns itself with two aspects: wisdom as found in Old Testament Proverbs and wisdom as found in the process of character formation in the concept of *ubuntu*. The question arises as to how we should approach this large and somewhat intractable subject of Old Testament wisdom and the African concept of *ubuntu*? Both subjects have been variously treated in a large number of discussions, but none of the views expressed in these debates has been adequate for establishing a dialogue between the two aspects. Though this dissertation does not pretend to provide all the answers, it does attempt to clarify certain issues in this area and help to clear the way towards a constructive dialogue.

*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* is a Zulu saying that has its equivalents in nearly every sub-Saharan culture. Briefly it translates to: “A human being is a human being because of (other) human beings.” This points to a unique African view of human beings, and numerous attempts have been made to describe an African world-view and philosophy.

The Western philosophical assertion (Descartes) “I think, therefore I am” may be reformulated in Southern African terms as “We are, therefore I am.” The community, with all that it implies, could be seen as one of the strongest forces in Africa. Only in



this intricate network of relationships and wisdom a person is able to reach fulfilment. When this human network is fragmented, basic humanity is threatened.

This emphasis is also found in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. The sages of the Old Testament place great importance on the harmony in the community and strongly emphasise obedience to wisdom to accomplish this harmony.

If the forms of societal emphasis in Israel and Africa were similar, we need not be surprised to find similar proverbs relating to both cases. If the forms and problems of life in Israel and Africa are similar, then it becomes increasingly unlikely that Hebrew Wisdom would only be derived from the surrounding high cultures of the ancient Near East.

### **Essential terminology, which forms part of the formulation of the problem:**

#### **i. Obedience**

One has the impression that the language with reference to obedience in Old Testament wisdom literature has quite a different relationship to these terms from the one we have in modern times. This emphasises another problem that could be indicated by referring to the first five verses of Proverbs chapter 1 as an example of this problem.

#### **Proverbs 1:1-5**

<sup>1</sup> מִשְׁלֵי שְׁלֹמֹה בֶן־דָּוִד מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל:  
<sup>2</sup> לְדַעַת חֲכָמָה וּמוֹסֵר לְהַבִּין אִמְרֵי בִינָה:  
<sup>3</sup> לְקַחַת מוֹסֵר הַשְׂכָּל צְדָק וּמִשְׁפָּט וּמִיִּשְׁרִים:  
<sup>4</sup> לָתֵת לַפְתָּאִים עֲרֻמָּה לְנֹעַר דַּעַת וּמִזְמָה:  
<sup>5</sup> יִשְׁמַע חָכָם וַיּוֹסֶף לָקַח וְנָבוֹן תַּחְבֵּלוֹת יִקְנֶה:

(Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia)

[1] *The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel:*

[2] *That men may know wisdom and instruction,  
 understand words of insight,*

[3] *receive instruction in wise dealing,*

*righteousness, justice, and equity;*  
*[4] that prudence may be given to the simple,*  
*knowledge and discretion to the youth --*  
*[5] the wise man also may hear and increase in learning,*  
*and the man of understanding acquire skill,*  
(Revised Standard Version)

Von Rad (1975:13) asks how an exegesis that takes words seriously, would deal adequately with a series of statements as shown above? Von Rad would like to know what the many individual terms mean. In what sense are they associated with each other, and in what sense are they differentiated from each other?

Certainly the individual terms used appear to be in contrast with each other; but perhaps not in a way that could be defined precisely, for they also simultaneously clearly overlap with each other. By the culmination of many terms the text seems to aim at something larger, something more comprehensive, which could not be distinguished sufficiently by means of any one of the terms that were used (Von Rad 1975:14).

## **ii. Old Testament Wisdom**

The wisdom teachings of the book of Proverbs are at issue in this study. This is not only because of their significance to Israelite society. It may be objected that I am neglecting or ignoring the non-biblical wisdom literature. For the purpose of this study there is no reason to discuss all non-biblical wisdom literature at length. With regard to Job and Qohelet: these will not be ignored altogether, but extensive treatment is beyond the scope of this study.

It has been decided that this study be limited to chapters 1, 8 & 9 in the Book of Proverbs. That does not mean that the rest of the book of Proverbs would be ignored, but it would not be dealt with expressly. It is assumed that the discussion of wisdom in Proverbs 1, 8 & 9 is broad enough to accommodate the other sections of this book and to provide us with a valuable comprehension of Proverbs 1-9 as a whole.



There is general consensus among scholars that Proverbs 1-9 consist of wisdom relating to younger persons that simultaneously serve to introduce the purpose of the book. The first nine chapters of Proverbs comprise of relatively lengthy, organised sections of instructions that are communicated by a parent to a youth. Brown argues that "in their final form, Proverbs 1-9, along with chapter 31, provide a unifying focus for the book as a whole, a focus established by the voices of various characters and the values they impart" (1996:23). These chapters provide a sound orientation for the understanding of wisdom, world view and obedience.

### **iii. Worldview**

Worldview constitutes the symbolic universe that has profound implications on a variety of significant human practices. It establishes the hermeneutic framework by which texts are interpreted. It is that mental medium through which the world is known.

The notions of both inclusivity and unity when exploring traditional African world views become increasingly apparent. These arise both from ideas about the universe and traditional African values of spirituality and community.

Ubuntu values of spirituality and community arise from and rest on these notions of the universe. African worldviews recognize the centrality of the spiritual feature of all elements of life. Personhood is attained through belonging in community. The single, most important value in traditional Africa is that of belonging in community. This is based on the very existence of being human, on one's humanness. The root of being human is to belong in community (Shutte 1993:47).

In the African worldviews it is the community which defines the person, as person, not some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory. To develop as people, people need to be empowered by others. Human capacity for free self-realization requires a certain kind of influence of other persons if it is to develop towards fulfillment. The process of finding fulfillment is made possible by virtue of complex interpersonal transactions with others. The interpersonal transactions which bring about individual growth reveal a kind of personal energy or power that is not physical, but which is embodied and expressed in physical reality.

Every member of the community shares the responsibility for strengthening the life force of others in the community. The morality of any act is determined by its life-giving potential; good acts contribute to the life force of the community and bad acts, however seemingly insignificant, diminish life. The community is a mystical body encompassing both the dead and living members, in which every member has an obligation to each other.

#### **iv. Experiential knowledge**

Experiential knowledge is not only a very complex entity, but also a very vulnerable one. This cannot be otherwise, for it renders human beings an invaluable service in enabling them to function in the sphere of life other than as a complete stranger and it puts people in the position of understanding at least to a certain extent that sphere of life as an ordered system (Von Rad 1975:3). Once an experience has found expression in a proverb, a sentence, a maxim or even in an aphorism, a multi-layered process has come to an end.

The proverbs had significant meaning, because in them the experiences of the fathers in life were granted a hearing in the present generation. “Here we find agreement between the proverbs of ancient Israel and those of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Africa and the Orient” (Westermann 1995:122)

Such opinions raise a number of questions that this study will address, such as:

- ❑ Where does this happen?
- ❑ What are the given presuppositions for this type of intellectual productivity?
- ❑ If we disregard the proverb for a moment, then the composition of wisdom in the Old Testament seems to be connected with particular periods in the intellectual life of nations.
- ❑ Is this also true of Africa and morality in Africa?
- ❑ Is obedience to this experience necessary for the success of a nation?

The ancient Israelites participated in the business of cultivating experiential knowledge. In doing so ancient Israel encountered perceptions largely similar to those of other ancient peoples. This thesis will aim at contributing a better understanding of what we are accustomed to include under these general terms of



wisdom, obedience, world view and experiential knowledge so as to establish a dialogue.

## **v. Trends of thought**

We will be elaborating some of the specific trends of thought and theological contexts in which obedience functions in wisdom in Proverbs 1-9 and in *ubuntu*. The way to understanding this intellectual activity in Palestine and in Africa goes beyond the examination of numerous individual texts and sayings. Many of these invite the reader to pause at length over them; others appear trivial to us, and we are no longer able to understand what is important in them.

One way of reaching an understanding of the teachings of the wise men that will not be pursued here, is the examination of terminology in abstraction. No doubt a list of terms in wisdom literature and a list of *ubuntu* sayings could be gathered, but in my opinion it would be a fruitless undertaking to move from an analysis or comparison of the specific content of these terms and from the way in which they are used, to any kind of sound judgements about the nature of obedience as interpreted by the different contexts. Basically, each sentence and each saying represents its own strand of wisdom and should not be expected to be interpreted in relation to Proverbs 1, 8 & 9 on the basis of similar sayings.

It is thus noteworthy to recognize that this dissertation does not present a comparison between the concept of wisdom and the concept of *ubuntu*. If one has to undertake a comparison within wisdom theology, it should not be restricted to only the concepts of wisdom and *ubuntu*, but include important concepts such as *יְרֵאָה יְהוָה* ; *דָּעַת* ; *חֶסֶד* ; *מוֹסֵר*. The problem with a comparison of concepts from different cultures is cultural relativism.

People who come from different cultures are bound to judge one another according to what they regard as right or wrong, good or bad, true or false, beautiful or ugly, etc. Most important is the necessity of evaluating one another according to the most appropriate context or point of view (Fabian 1983:38-52).



It has thus become critically important for people to learn about one another's culture in order to understand one another's behavior, and react appropriately. Cultural relativism implies that beliefs and behavior should be seen against the background of the categories and concepts of the culture to which they belong. For that reason the dialectical nature of wisdom in dialogue with *ubuntu* is respected in this dissertation.

## 1.2 Hypothesis

The hypothesis of this study is that the traditional African concept of *ubuntu* shares many features with wisdom in Old Testament Proverbs 1-9 and that a dialogue between *ubuntu* and Proverbs is significant for the study of wisdom literature and Old Testament theological-ethics. This dialogue will enlighten both continuity and discontinuity within the concepts of wisdom and *ubuntu*.

*Ubuntu* is an important and relevant African concept that could be employed to reveal the relational texture of wisdom as theological concept. *Ubuntu* is a concept, which presumes a pre-modern sociological arrangement and deals with the activities surrounding humanity or humanness. It is a form of *Weltanschauung* that is shaped by a value system based on the formation of a person's character.

It should be remembered that the notion of *ubuntu* presumes a sociological arrangement and ideal. It could be said that although this is an appealing mode of life to many African people, it still remains only an ideal for many. The same could be said for wisdom in the ancient Israelite society. It is generally accepted that the perfection of man is nurtured within the context of the extended family through the fulfilment of the various roles of child, husband, grandparent, etc.

This is by no means an easy undertaking as Bosman (1994:265) believes that "ethical reflection on the Old Testament in South Africa is challenged by the striking of some sort of balance between individual and social interests." Proverbs provide numerous indications of how to achieve this interdependence among people. In the context of *ubuntu* the same notion is found in the idea that everyone should contribute to the survival of the society; a belief in collective responsibility; progress is not made individually, but by the help of other people; co-operation is important to every

society. *Ubuntu* tells us that a joint effort is often needed, because when people are divided, they cannot carry out any plan or agree on anything.

### 1.3 Methodology

A close reading will be used to examine the particular words, images and organisation of the scenes or passages in *ubuntu* and in Proverbs 1-9. Close reading is a technique used to unravel dense or complex ideas and language or to draw attention to individual parts in order to make their meaning clearer. In addition to answering the question, "What does this passage mean?" an explication seeks to answer questions such as: How does this passage reveal its meaning? How does the passage unfold? What phrases, images, patterns or problems intrigue the analyst? What drives the text? How do the words, images and ideas contribute to the meaning?

During close reading one does not need to refer to every line in the passage, but one should address its main features and use quotations from the text to demonstrate and explore the relevant interpretation.

Clines argues that "one's general knowledge of life and particular knowledge of other works of the same author, or in the case of the Old Testament, other Old Testament books, contribute – often unconsciously – to one's understanding of a passage; the commentaries draw explicit attention to all kinds of such extraneous data" (Clines 1983:34).

The practice of close reading is sometimes complained about because of its association with the New Criticism school of critics of English literature and because of the extravagance of some of its practitioners. Close reading of a passage while it requires wholehearted concentration upon that text, does not demand that all other texts should be expunged from one's mind, though some critics of close reading have supposed that it does (Clines 1983:33).

The skill called "close reading" is fundamental for interpreting literature. "Reading closely" means developing a deep understanding and a precise interpretation of a literary passage that is based first and foremost on the words themselves. But a close



reading does not stop there; rather, it embraces larger themes and ideas evoked and/or implied by the passage itself. Doing a close reading involves a thought process that moves from small details to larger issues and will enable us to understand the dialogue between wisdom and ubuntu.

A dialogue may lead to fresh, exciting insights and a deeper understanding of issues of central concern in different fields of research, such as theology and anthropology. They can lead to the identification of gaps in knowledge and may point to possible directions that could be followed and about which the researcher may not previously have been aware. They may also help to sharpen the focus of analysis of the subject under study by suggesting new perspectives.

The question can be posed how close reading provides us with a means of “escaping” the problem of cultural relativism? Close reading of a text means not only reading and understanding the meanings of the individual printed words; it also involves making yourself sensitive to all the nuances and connotations of the text and other information outside of the text. This information outside of the text might be items of social or cultural history, or even other academic disciplines which might seem relevant, such as philosophy or anthropology (Clines 1983:35). Close reading of certain texts within Proverbs in this dissertation will point to the relationship of some elements of the text to things outside it, such as ubuntu.

A dialogue through intercultural studies give researchers a means of confronting findings in identifying and illuminating similarities and differences – not only in the observed characteristics of particular institutions, systems or practices, but also in the search for possible explanations in terms of national likeness and unlikeness. An intercultural dialogue is forced to adopt a different cultural perspective to learn to understand the thought processes of another culture and to see it from the native's viewpoint, while also reconsidering their own worldview from the perspective of a skilled, external observer.

In setting limits for this study it is necessary to draw together the principle questions which have become apparent in this general introduction. There are a number of these questions and when the ethical content of wisdom in Proverbs 1-9 and *ubuntu* is

considered, this would necessarily lead to some further questions. At the outset one should recognise that there are indeed many more questions than answers for them. An awareness of some of these would be important in order to appreciate better the scope and excitement of the world of wisdom and *ubuntu*.

It will be argued in this study that, metaphorically speaking, the text is never fully in possession of any single reader, nor is the reader ever fully in the possession of any text. The text retains the ability to elude and overturn every reading. In the same way the reader preserves the capacity endlessly to “rewrite” the text (Aichele *et al.* 1995:130-131).

This study will not necessarily provide an Afrocentric reading of Proverbs. Through an intercultural study it will be argued that there is such an overwhelming affinity between the two types of obedience that are expected by *ubuntu* and by wisdom in Old Testament Proverbs, that we need to give serious consideration to Afrocentric hermeneutics as an alternative to Western readings. Such Afrocentric hermeneutics has the potential to be more responsive to the context of the Old Testament than the Protestant hermeneutic tradition developed in the West.

Intercultural studies represent a broad category of scholarly inquiries related to the differences and commonality across cultures. Human commonality is understood to be based on the oneness of humankind and differences to be the outgrowth of historical, geographic and socio-political variability. The aim of this method is not to copy from one context into another context a theological approach which has been developed, but rather to stimulate critical and creative thinking. Therefore, the concept of worldview will be used to establish a relevant intercultural dialogue at different levels.

The notion of worldview has been used and applied in various contexts (Helve 1995:39). There is no single definition that could adequately explain the term, which includes a multiplicity of models, perspectives and contexts. In this research worldview is understood as a complex meaning and belief system in a specific culture (Du Toit 1997:152). Geertz (1973:127) argues that worldview is the picture of the symbolic representation in the understanding of the concept of nature, of self or



society. It comprises of extensive ideas of instruction and order. This is why worldview can be used as a methodological instrument to work interculturally, as it influences every aspect of human life and the interpretation of reality. Worldview is the context in which our lives gain ordered significance (Carrol 1986:32).

Throughout this study I will use gender inclusive language, even though the Old Testament wisdom literature always addresses the subject of instruction as “my son”.

## 1.4 Outline

The outline of the dissertation is as follows: In **Chapter 1** the problem is introduced and described. Having outlined the hypothesis, the methodology and the delimitation of the research are described. **Chapter 2** analyses *ubuntu* and morality in Africa. In this chapter it is shown that *ubuntu* expresses one of the most basic and widely adhered to aspects of African philosophy. Translating the term of *ubuntu* is virtually impossible. The Western individualism does not have the ability to grasp the radically communally based concept of *ubuntu*. The closest translation is humanity or humanitarianism, but the concept has strong overtones of communality.

In Chapter 2 it is indicated that the African concept of humankind should be understood in terms of a set of beliefs or pictures of humans in the form of empirical generalisations. An African person is an integral part of society and thus as an individual he can only exist corporately. The view that the individual should take precedence over the community is discouraged. African people adhere to a collective consciousness or communalist worldview.

In **Chapter 3** the worldview of Old Testament wisdom literature is presented in order to understand the concept of wisdom. The immediate concern of Chapter 3 is the insistence upon the moral governance of the world as an inherent part of the work of divine providence that was of fundamental importance to wisdom. Through the concept of blessing, righteousness and life the religious vocabulary of piety and worship intersects and overlaps with wisdom's ideas of a natural order, which pervades world and society.

A different aspect of wisdom is found in Deuteronomy 6:1-25. This passage displays moral connections with wisdom. Its moral tone shows similarities to the direct instructions in Proverbs 1-9 as reference to the “fear of the Lord”. This phrase plays a prominent role in Proverbs 1-9, though it is common throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. This feature appears commonly in both deuteronomic and wisdom literature. This indicates shared interests, rather than a direct dependence by wisdom writers on wisdom traditions or dependence on deuteronomistic theology.

The three books, explicitly labelled “wisdom”, provide the backdrop for a consideration of wisdom themes occurring throughout the Hebrew canon. Themes, forms and vocabulary common to these books qualify as markers of wisdom materials.

The book of Proverbs is of considerable interest because of its shared characteristics with the books of Ecclesiastes and Job. R N Whybray's study of the vocabulary of the wisdom tradition, which he calls the intellectual tradition, emphasises the close relationship between Proverbs and the books which appear to criticise Proverbs' basic assumptions (Whybray 1974:135).

In **Chapter 4** a close reading of Proverbs 1, 8 & 9 is found. It is arguable that the post-exilic didactic poetry of Proverbs 1-9 represents a distinctive new development of the wisdom tradition. In Chapter 4 it is evident that Proverbs 1-9 displays a distinctively theologised version of development of the wisdom tradition. Proverbs 1, 8 & 9 provide the reader with a good understanding of the younger wisdom literature and can be used as a focal point to understand the different features of Proverbs 1-9.

Rather than doing a close reading of all nine chapters, these three chapters are chosen. Proverbs 1 & 9 provides us with an excellent introduction and forms an outline for understanding Proverbs 1-9. Proverbs 8 are also chosen as it can be understood as giving substance to Wisdom's claims. Proverbs 8 identifies wisdom inherent in the father's instruction in chapters 2-7. It should be noted that Proverbs 8 highlights important themes and images reflected in chapters 1 & 9. Proverbs 8 as a whole builds with ever-increasing claims by Wisdom, claims which culminate in the claims surrounding the creation, and ultimately in the claim to be life itself.



An especially interesting feature of the teaching of wisdom lies in the extent to which it explores the inner life of human beings. Since the search for wisdom is an activity of mind, then it is in the mind of human beings where God is most directly active. Consequently **Chapter 5** is devoted to wisdom in dialogue with *ubuntu*. In this chapter the problem of drawing lines in order to confine the moral domain in the formation of character is addressed on different levels.

**Chapter 6** concludes this study, laying emphasis on the increasing interest in the role that culture and notions – such as wisdom and *ubuntu* – play in determining human relations. Wisdom and *ubuntu* place a high value on communal life. Maintaining positive relations within the society is a collective task in which everyone is involved.

We conclude this chapter in acknowledging the fact that insight that is gained in African theology is important in theological studies, but ought to be at the service of the church in Africa as well. I believe that the Christian community, the church, is in South Africa the most suitable body to bolster the community at large and that the dialogue between wisdom and *ubuntu* is significant for the church, as it is for Old Testament theology.

The bibliography follows after Chapter 6.

## CHAPTER 2: *Ubuntu* as worldview in Africa

### 2.1 Introduction

*"Chara chimive hachitswane inda" - African Shona Proverb*

*A thumb working on its own is useless. It has to work collectively with other fingers to get strength and be able to achieve anything.*

As I venture to write on *ubuntu* in Africa, I am aware that the continent of Africa is immense, not only in terms of its size, but more importantly, with respect to cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity that characterise the people who live in its various regions. However, while there is diversity on the continent of Africa, there is also unity that is grounded in our common worldview, spiritual ecology and cultural/religious practices.

*Ubuntu* is an African concept. The word, or derivatives of the word, may be found as far north as Cameroon. *Ubuntu* expresses one of the most basic and widely adhered to aspects of African philosophy. Translating the notion of *ubuntu* is nearly impossible. Western individualism does not have the ability to grasp the radically communally based concept of *ubuntu*. The closest translation would be "humanity" or "humanitarianism", but the concept in reality has much stronger overtones of communality. When Ela (1990:6-11) refers to the importance of the community in the faith of an African, he refers to community as a sacrament.

A worldview is how a person sees the comprehensive reality and gives orientation or direction to one's life. The *ubuntu* lifestyle is determined by a conception that it is desirable for humankind to have close relationships with his or her fellow human, alive or dead. Even the ancestors are not to be forgotten and their continued presence is respected (Ela 1990:11).

The African concept of man should be understood in terms of a set of beliefs or pictures of man in the form of empirical generalisations. An African person is an integral part of society and thus, as an individual. Humankind can only exist



corporately and the view is discouraged that the individual should take precedence over the community. The African person adheres to a collective consciousness or communalist worldview. This worldview should not be confused with ideology in a practical sense (Teffo 1996:100).

According to Liebenberg (1990:14) ideology is characterised by three elements. Firstly, it has a justifying element providing reasons for certain actions to be undertaken. Secondly, it will contain a programme that would direct actions in the form of practical guidelines. Thirdly, there will be certain consequences, such as the establishment of political structures.

Worldviews are usually preoccupied with ideas and beliefs about fundamental matters, such as the meaning of death or humanity's place in the universe. On the other hand ideology may refer to the general process of producing ideas, beliefs and values in social life. These signify practices and symbolic processes in a particular society "living" these practices (Liebenberg 1990:15).

The essence of *ubuntu* is collectively shared experience and collective solidarity. This has serious implications for the development of people and organisations. Traditional training and development approaches may be very marginal and of peripheral relevance to the development of people and organisations in Africa (Mbigi 1993:109).

If *ubuntu* could be revived where it is not practised anymore, it would lead to a situation where discipline and respect for human life and coexistence would be recreated. This would benefit societies undergoing rapid changes and transformation on all levels of life, in the sense of creating a peaceful and prosperous society (Broodryk 1997:5).

The first time that *Ubuntu* was probably recorded in Hansard, the official parliamentary record of speeches delivered in the South African Parliament, was on 18 October 1994. Dr Kader Asmal, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry, gave a veritable lecture on *ubuntu* to the former State President of South Africa, F W de Klerk, in whose years in office as President, squatter camps proliferated (Maphisa

1994:1). This speech related to the former apartheid government that used to regard black people as foreigners and provided only temporary and inferior housing for them. Hence the problem arose of the shortage of adequate housing and general poverty in present South African society. Dr Asmal then expounded on the role *ubuntu* could play in improving these conditions.

According to Maphisa (1994: 5) Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini commented as follows during a graduation address at the University of Zululand on 25 June 1994: “*Ubuntu* forbids that some people should be warm while others freeze; that some people should have everything to eat at their disposal, while others yawn from hunger. *Ubuntu* says those who are not protected against the cold and those who hunger, should be assisted to confront such tribulations head on so that they don’t prevent their *ubuntu* from blossoming fully.”

*Ubuntu* is the humanist experience of treating all people with respect and granting them their human dignity. *Ubuntu* seems to be a vital tool and a viable method in creating a new cultural and humane environment where the values and norms of all are tolerated and respected. On tolerance Sindane (1994: 23) says: “we all have to try to do away with the old intolerant ways of thinking and this is going to take time. But the sooner we start the better. More than anything else, the long standing, distorted attitudes and perceptions that we have of one other and of ourselves, have been – and will continue to be – the most important cause of our tolerance of one another – be it on a social, a religious, a political or a cultural level.”

For many decades Westerners thought that non-Westerners’ perceptions and activities were primitive and stupid and it is only now that some begin to realise that these perceptions and activities are more often than not realistic to the specific situation and supported by a great deal of wisdom. This reference to wisdom may be interpreted as the wisdom of *ubuntu* (Swanepoel 1992:23).

Mphahlele (1983:218) regards it as follows: “I used to want to justify myself and my own kind to the white man. I later discovered that it was not worth it. I think now the white man has no right to tell me how to order my life as a social being, or order it for me. He may teach how to make a shirt or to read and to write, but my forebears and I



could teach him, a thing or two if only he would listen and allow himself to feel Africa is no more for the white man who comes here to teach and to control her human and material forces and not to learn.”

## 2.2 Defining *ubuntu*

It is no overstatement that no other phrase in contemporary South Africa has been overused, abused and misused as the traditional African aphorism, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*. It has become a trend and a profitable means of commodification. This is evident in its wide and mostly careless use amongst almost all sectors of our society.

For some reason many people believe that it is a magic formula which can *solve* many, if not all, of our problems and that we merely need to “rediscover” it from its past and apply it to present conditions. Such romanticism ignores the socio-economic setting presumed by this aphorism (Busakwe 1997:63).

In the printed media the business sector and academic circles, this concept continues to occupy a central theme.

In an attempt to define *ubuntu*, Musopole (1992:39) identifies five interrelated aspects to humanity that is indispensable for understanding the concept. These are form, spiritness, community, moral uprightness and productiveness. The unity between the first three – form, spiritness and community – is a given. The last two, moral uprightness and productiveness, are the result of social nurture, a process of *kukula ndi umunthu*, literally: growing up into humanness. The first three are a precondition for the last two, while the latter two are in turn necessary for an acceptable form of *ubuntu*.

The integrity of the human being is of the highest importance and hence humans need to have an integrated life. Words and actions are two sides of the same coin. Only one's community could testify whether a person has *ubuntu*. If one's life, community and world are adversely affected because a person is untrue to his or her mode of existence, then that person's humanity is compromised. Consistent denial of one's humanity would lead the community to branding one as a non-person. This is a

severe punishment, because it cuts the individual off from the community. Conversely, if one does something exceptionally admirable, the greatest compliment that could be given is to describe him or her as human. “That person is *Munthu*”, is a very high compliment indeed.

Although *ubuntu* should be regarded in its context, it is nevertheless not a foreign concept. It is widely known and respected as a moral value amongst the indigenous people of South Africa. *Ubuntu* is of such a high value that people apply its ethical lessons in all aspects of life, for instance in its physical, institutional, economic and social-welfare levels (Broodryk 1997:5).

The above does not imply that the notion of *ubuntu* is not open to criticism. For example, the characteristics of showing compassion to others, not to steal or murder, to show respect to human beings and nature, to live a disciplined life, to do upon others as you would expect others to do upon yourself, and to create happiness and friendship are all qualities that feature strongly in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament.

We can also describe *ubuntu* as a cultural philosophy, which appears to be an acknowledged philosophical trend in Africa. According to Oruka (1990:88) that philosophy is always associated with culture that in turn is a product of a given race, ethnicity and society.

Makhudu (1993:40) states that *ubuntu* is a comprehensive feature of African community life. *Ubuntu* is experienced daily as a reality equally by children, by teenagers and by adults. Every aspect of African life is shaped to embrace *ubuntu* as a process and philosophy that reflects the African heritage, traditions, culture, customs, beliefs, value systems and the extended family structures.

Vilikazi (1991:4) defines *ubuntu* as humanism and that the human being is the foremost priority in all conduct: “The value, dignity, safety, welfare, health, beauty, love and development of the human being, and respect for the human being, are to come first, and should be promoted to first rank before all other considerations, particularly, in our time, before economic, financial, and political factors are taken



into consideration. That is the essence of humanism ... (and) is the essence of *Ubuntu/Botho*.”

The beliefs and assumptions of *ubuntu* have been transferred orally from one generation to the next in traditional societies, and in present times they also receive popular attention in the written word. *Ubuntu* appears to be a fundamental concept of good behaviour in traditional African culture and it's *Weltanschauung*. Oruka (1990:30) describes *Weltanschauung* as “the construction of myths and oral traditions and the rules of good behaviour which have been taught to children for centuries.” These rules play an important part in the creation of cultural perceptions. In the *ubuntu* context, good behaviour contributes to combating unacceptable acts. Thus, if more people could observe which *ubuntu* teaches, it should lead to a more ordered and caring society.

According to Broodryk (1997:67) it is difficult from a Western perspective to understand the condition of illiteracy: “If you cannot read and write, you have to rely on verbal education and folklore to learn the rules (norms and values) of society. Philosophising is speculative with a heavy reliance on uncritical acceptance of what is transferred from generation to generation. *Ubuntu* has also been transferred verbally in this manner, and this method is different from rational Western education. It is however, a method that seems to suit Africa and therefore a valid method for Africa in teaching rules and regulations.”

In order to understand linguistically the full meaning of the word *ubuntu*, the prefix “*ubu*” should first be separated from the root “*ntu*”. “*Ubu*” refers to the abstract. “*Ntu*” is an ancestor who spawned human society and gave us our way of life as human beings. Since society should be managed and organised for the sake of all, it requires co-operation, sharing and charity in this communal way of life. Therefore, widows or orphans may not be neglected – they all ultimately belong to someone. *Ubuntu* is thus the quality of being human (Mbigi 1993:24). *Ubuntu* as “*unhu*” which, literally translated, means ‘a man is a man’ – which forms the values of the African tribal village community. Coinciding herewith, a person is entitled to unconditional respect and dignity.

### 2.3. *Ubuntu* as worldview

Spurred on by dramatic changes in South Africa, especially the worldwide impact of Nelson Mandela, the traditional African philosophy of *ubuntu* supports a renaissance that is reaching all across the continent. Worldviews are ingrained in the African perspective on human existence. Centuries old African values and worldviews come to play an important role in supporting the typical online mode of teaching and education (Mbigi & Maree 1995:4).

South Africa is a multicultural country and educators are aware of the importance and urgent need for the notion of values in the classroom and in education. Such values address peace, respect, love, honesty, responsibility and happiness. These values are effectively encapsulated in the *ubuntu* worldview. It requires a real respect for human rights and related values, and an honest appreciation of differences.

*Ubuntu* articulates a worldview and vision of humanity (Mbigi & Maree 1995:5). *Ubuntu* regards humanity as an integral part of ecosystems that lead to a communal responsibility to sustain life. Human value is based on social, cultural and spiritual criteria. The White Paper on Welfare, published in the South African Government Gazette of 1996 captures *ubuntu* as: "the principle of caring for each other's well-being ...and a spirit of mutual support ...Each individual's humanity is ideally expressed through his or her relationship with others and theirs in turn through recognition of the individual's humanity."

*Ubuntu* means that people are people through other people. It also acknowledges both the rights and the responsibilities of every citizen in promoting both individual and also social well-being. *Ubuntu* also has an element of consensus interwoven into its philosophy. Traditional African democracy operates in the form of discussion (Mbigi & Maree 1995:8). While there are always leaders, everyone has an equal chance to speak until some agreement, consensus or group cohesion is reached. African traditional culture subsequently has an almost infinite capacity for the pursuit of consensus and group cohesion. The term *simunye* (we are one, unity is strength) reinforces this community sentiment (Louw 2002:69-87).



*Ubuntu* also inspires us to expose ourselves to others to encounter the differences of their humanness, so as to inform and enrich our own. *Ubuntu* furthermore inspires us to be open to others, to learn from others as we learn of ourselves. This respect for difference in others is paramount to *ubuntu* and respect for elder in terms of life experience and wisdom is a core value in traditional, rural and also urban African societies.

As such, *ubuntu*'s respect for others also entails respect for individuality. But it differs from traditional Western concepts of individuality as expressed in the famous Cartesian maxim, "I think, therefore I am." The individual in *ubuntu* is not solitary, but defined in terms of his or her relationship to others. As relationships change, so do the individuals. According to this definition, individuals only exist in their relationship with others, and as these relationships change, so does the character of the individual.

We can, therefore, state that *ubuntu*, as a worldview, is generally regarded as the foundation of sound human relations in African societies. Its proponents claim that *ubuntu* does not only form the basis of "an African World View" but also "runs through the veins of all Africans" (Makhudu 1993:41). It is a general custom in African circles to refer to terms such as "veins" or "blood". Consequently Makhudu is using a metaphor by referring to *ubuntu* as 'running through the veins' of people.

Dholomo (1991:51) sees *ubuntu*'s greatest strength as being an indigenous, purely African, philosophy of life. It is not important from a European or American point of view. It is something truly unique to Africa and all African languages throughout the continent have a word or expression that defines the person (*umuntu*) in this vein.

Chinkanda (1994:1) describes *ubuntu* as follows: "*Ubuntu* is a term which derives from "*muntu*" meaning a person, a human being. It defines a positive quality supposedly possessed by a person (an internal state of being or the very essence of being human). It has manifestations in good deeds like alms-giving, being sympathetic, caring, sensitive to the needs and wants of others, being respectful, considerate, patient, kind and all other positive God give human qualities." One of

the principles on which *ubuntu* is based, thus teaches obedience to society in a fashion that is generally accepted.

*Ubuntu* defines the individual in terms of his/her relationship with others (Shutte 1993:46f). According to this definition, individuals only exist in their relationships with others, and as these relationships change, so do the characters of the individuals. Thus understood, the word "individual" signifies a plurality of personalities corresponding to the multiplicity of relationships in which the individual in question stands. By definition an individual means "being-with-others". "With-others", as Macquarrie rightly observes, "...is not added on to a pre-existent and self-sufficient being; rather, both this being (the self) and the others find themselves in a whole wherein they are already related" (1972:104). *Ubuntu* unites the self and the world in a peculiar web of reciprocal relations in which subject and object become indistinguishable, and in which "I think, therefore I am", is substituted for "I participate, therefore I am" (Shutte, 1993:47).

In the West, individualism often translates into a rash, unthinking competitiveness. Individual interest rules supreme and society or others are regarded as merely a means to individual ends (Khoza 1994:4, 5, 7; Prinsloo 1997:2). This is in stark contrast to the African preference for co-operation, group work or *shosholoz*a ("work as one", i.e. team work). Against this background it is revealing to note that there are approximately 800 000 so-called "stokvels" in South Africa. Stokvels are joint undertakings or collective enterprises, such as savings clubs, burial societies and other (often formally registered) cooperatives. The term refers to a wide range of community-based financial arrangements according to which resources are pooled and then again disbursed to members as either (interest-free) loans or payouts (Du Toit 2000:32-33). The stokvel economy may be described as capitalism with a human face or, if you wish, a socialist form of capitalism. Profits are shared on an equal basis. Making a profit is important, but it never involves the exploitation of others. Or, as a Sepedi (Northern Sotho) saying dictates: *Feta kgomo o tshware motho*, i.e. "if and when one is faced with a decisive choice between wealth and the preservation of the life of another human being, then one should opt for the preservation of life" (Ramose 1999:194). As such, stokvels are based on the *ubuntu* "extended family system", i.e. all involved should be considered as brothers and sisters, members of the



same family (Broodryk 1997a: 4, 11, 13-14; 1997b: 38f, 70f; Lukhele 1990:32; Kimmerle 1995:88; Prinsloo 1998:44-45).

Like the *ubuntu* desire for consensus, this inclusive, collectivist or communalist conception of individuality could easily derail into an oppressive collectivism or communalism. This fact has evoked various responses from African authors. For example, while he lauds the "distinctive African" inclination towards collectivism and a collective sense of responsibility, Teffo (1994a: 7, 12) is quick to add that the African conception of man does not negate individuality. It merely discourages the view that the individual should take precedence over the community. In the same vein, Khoza (1994:9; Prinsloo 1995:4) challenges *ubuntu* to create a balance between complete individual autonomy and homonymy, i.e. to broaden respect for the individual and clarify collectivism of its negative elements. Ndaba points out that the collective consciousness evident in the African culture does not mean that the African subject wallows in a formless, shapeless or elementary collectivity. It simply means that the African subjectivity develops and thrives in a relational setting provided by ongoing contact and interaction with others (1994:14).

An oppressive communalism constitutes a derailment, an abuse of *ubuntu*. By contrast, true *ubuntu* incorporates dialogue; in other words it incorporates both relation and distance. It preserves the other in his/her otherness and uniqueness, without letting him/her slip into the distance (Macquarrie 1972:110; Shutte 1993:49, 51; Kimmerle 1995:90-93).

Ndaba's emphasis on the "ongoing-ness" of the contact and interaction with others on which the African subjectivity feeds, points to a final important ingredient of the "mutual exposure" prescribed by *ubuntu*. The flexibility of the other is well noted by *ubuntu*. Or, as is sometimes claimed: "For the (African) humanist, life is without absolutes" (Teffo 1994a: 11). An *ubuntu* perception of the other is never fixed or rigidly closed, but adjustable or open-ended. It allows the other to be and to become. This accords with the grammar of the concept *ubuntu*, which indicates both a state of being and one of becoming. As a process of self-realisation through others, it enhances the self-realisation of others (Broodryk 1997: 5-7).

The agreement or consensus that *ubuntu* both describes and prescribes, is not set up in fixed or a-historical terms. It is not expected to apply or remain immutable always and everywhere. On the contrary, such an expectation fundamentally contradicts the African's conception of the universe, i.e. his/her conception of being "...as a perpetual and universal movement of sharing and exchange of the forces of life" (Ramose 1999:57-58). When the *ubuntuist* thus reads 'consensus', he/she also reads "open-endedness" and "possibility" (Louw 2002: 401). In chapter 5 of this dissertation the dialogue between wisdom and *ubuntu* will provide us with a critical discussion of the concept of *ubuntu* as worldview.

## 2.4. The religious community

African people are extremely religious, and each person has his/her own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion filters through into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it. A study of these religious systems is, therefore, ultimately a study of the peoples themselves in all the complexities of both traditional and modern life. "Our written knowledge of traditional religions is comparatively little, though increasing, and comes primarily from anthropologists and sociologists. Practically nothing has been produced by theologians, describing or interpreting these religions theologically" (Mbiti 1971:1).

One of the limitations in studying an African religious community is that religion is not only expressed in words; it consists essentially in ritual acts (Apostel 1981:153)<sup>1</sup>. It is important to recognise that *ubuntu* is taught orally and that the oral tradition is common to black cultures. Therefore, *ubuntu* cultural and religious norms have been transferred orally from generation to generation over a long time and have never been produced as literature or in a written form (Broodryk 1997:22).

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<sup>1</sup> V W Turner has undertaken a study in depth of such ritual acts in Zambia. In his book, "*The Drums of Affliction*" (Turner 1968:46), he describes in minute detail the rituals that are used by the Ndembu society to restore the strength of a person who has been afflicted by some evil or illness. His method is much less directed towards the verbal aspect of the happening, but his main aim is rather the analysis of the structure of actions. This does not prevent him from reaching a general interpretation: the Ndembu is both a matrilineal and a patrilocal society, with very loose social ties. Solidarity is at its height between father and son and between brothers, but descent is traced by the lineage of the mother. This creates a basic tension, a basic conflict in this society and every ritual is on the one side the re-enactment of various types of conflict, followed by a gathering of the community of the total group whose superior strength allows then the representation of the restoration of unity and harmony.



Old practices of *ubuntu* indicate various similarities between aspects of religion and *ubuntu* (Broodryk 1997:161). Sparks (1990:285) stresses the rediscovery of black cultural authenticity or aspects of African tradition as “the ancient religious concept of *ubuntu*, the unity of humanity and God, and the oneness of community.”

Dhlomo (1991:1) also argues that black people are generally observed as being very religious and the influence of sangomas, who are generally believed to be in close contact with ancestors and gods, play a major role in the black person’s life, particularly in the rural areas. Broodryk (1997:20) states: “*ubuntu* could easily be linked to the humane aspects observed in the majority of religions.”

With respect to an *ubuntu* culture, Makhudu (1993:41) refers to Aggrey Klaaste, former editor of *The Sowetan* newspaper (1993), who used the term *ubuntu* in connection with his concerns for nation building: in order to transform and rebuild the nation, the creation of a viable and operative *ubuntu* culture is needed, which is peaceful in character.

One of the difficulties in studying African religions is that one cannot refer to any sacred scriptures. According to Mbiti (1971:4) religions in African societies is written not on paper, but in people’s hearts, minds, oral history, rituals and religious personages, such as priests, rainmakers, officiating elders and even kings. It follows that everybody is a carrier of religion.

A substantial variety of beliefs and practices are to be found in any African society. These are not, however, formulated into a systematic set of dogmas which a person is expected to accept. People simply assimilate whatever religious ideas and practices are held or observed by their families and communities. These traditions have been handed down from ancestors, and each generation adopts these with modifications suitable to its own historical situations and needs.

Individuals hold differences of opinion on various subjects and the myths, rituals and ceremonies may differ in detail from area to area. Such ideas or views are not considered as either contrary or conforming to any orthodox opinion (Mbiti 1971:3).

### **2.4.1 Ubuntu: the physical viewpoint**

On the physical level, *ubuntu* is identifiable in various manifestations. For example, a house in the *ubuntuistic* sense is a more humane house. It may be larger, it may have private individual rooms or it may entail open spaced accommodation where people live together without privacy. It is a general tendency among black societies in South Africa that people in a family context would live together.

It is generally observed in townships that if a child becomes rich, the child will improve the dwelling or house that he/she lives in, but will not leave the neighbourhood where the other members of the family live. Vilikazi considers a person who suddenly acquires more wealth than others, and uses it for selfish purposes, as a danger to the community. Zulus would even regard such a person as a sorcerer (1988:10).

Abstractly, *ubuntu* is described (Newman 1991:27) as emphasising respect, dignity and mutual understanding. Learning to use these could form the basis for a behavioural approach towards "a better South Africa for all", as the current saying goes.

Disadvantaged or marginalised groups in most parts of the world survive on collective unity or solidarity and consciousness. The poverty of their material circumstances prevents them from surviving on their individual initiative only. They need to be united on selective survival issues and an unquestioning conformity is expected from everyone on these issues. Thus loyalty and conformity become prized values for every member of the group. The ability to sacrifice, suffer and display a spirit of service with regard to certain selected issues becomes a mark of heroism.

### **2.4.2 Ubuntu: the financial and economical field**

Mandela (1994:22) believes in the sharing of land, air and water. These were used in the past without the presence of taxes, tariffs or any form of payment for these commodities. Modern times have brought new financial concepts such as taxes, and



there is a reluctance to pay these taxes since African people experience this as a new and even unwelcome tendency.

In general it could be stated that the paying of taxes, fines and fees are expected to be executed by good human beings and that these activities are also be accepted within the notion of *ubuntu*. The problem arises as to whether it is justified that all human beings should pay the same level of taxes. It may be argued that it is morally correct to tax wealthy people more heavily. It may, however, also be argued that hard-working people usually earn more than the lazy and should, therefore, not be taxed more severely. The same arguments could be applied to most other economic activities and may even be contradictory from a Western perspective (Broodryk 1997:12).

Most economic activity may be viewed in the same way, since the capitalist system is unpopular in certain circles. Interpreted by the notion of *ubuntu*, it is seen as contradictory to African values, since profit-making is not of primary importance to humanity.

Vilikazi (1991:11) argues that material goods, money, or “the selfish profit motive” are not the overriding considerations in life and society, and that the humanistic values of *ubuntu* are of primary concern to society.

In traditional African life a subsistence economy was the known and trusted system. In this system, the profit motive did not feature as an important activity. According to Sparks (1990:20) subsistence thinking is not an energising experience - it is inclined to a fatalist outlook, which Europeans mistake for fecklessness and laziness. In this sense, it is better to eat heartily when there is plenty and to starve stoically when there is no food.

This seems to be a form of economic socialism where high-profit capitalism is absent and represents an ideal society. Vilikazi (1988:66) describes the latter, in its most general sense, and what he calls an ageless concept, as a society of equals in which there is neither rich nor poor, oppressors nor oppressed, and neither better-fed nor under-fed. Briefly, it is a society without social class – a society in which there is

communal ownership of economic resources and communal sharing of economic products without oppression.

Vilikazi (1991:11) states that in all societies before capitalism, the economy was always decisively interfered with, or guided by, non-economic rationality of non-economic consideration, for example: religious factors, political or state considerations. Humanistic considerations of ethical demands are derived from the sphere of clan, family or kinship relations. *Ubuntu* invariably played a significant role in such non-economic considerations, which almost always had priority over direct economic considerations.

Obedience to the concept of *ubuntu* regards economic activities as necessary and essential for human survival and this is reflected in the saying: man must work to eat.

With regard to *ubuntu*, obedience in the financial and economical field entails *inter alia* job creation. It is not about profit-making only, but also to assist with other noble aspects, such as training and the learning of a culture of productivity in the spirit of brotherhood. Brotherhood in *ubuntu* may be illustrated in the image of an old man treating the hurt knee of a young boy with his handkerchief under the bold heading of *ubuntu*, describing such a deed as *ubuntu* that encapsulates man's compassion to man. In this sense *ubuntu* applies a universal meaning of caring: it is normal that old people would care for children, especially someone who is suffering pain (Broodryk 1997:152).

African communities appear to have a general tendency towards collectivism. Khoza (1994:6) describes collectivism – in contrast with individualism – as any of several types of social organisation in which the individual is seen as being subordinate to a social collectivity, such as a state, a nation, a race, or a social class. Individualism is seen to be contrary to the above, because the rights and interests of the individual are given supremacy.



### 2.4.3 *Ubuntu*: welfare and social concepts

Mdluli (1987:64) states that *ubuntu* means being human, and this embrace values which the author calls a universal brotherhood for all Africans – sharing, treating and respecting other people as human beings.

A community does not exist in vacuum. It is part of a living vibrant environment in which various roles are played and this environment manifests itself on the natural, political, social, economic, cultural and psychological levels. Each of these levels has to be interpreted in its Afrocentric context as it appears in the workplace (Swanepoel 1992:25).

It is important to recognise that traditional African society used to be inclusive. Accommodation and interdependence are implied in this principle of inclusiveness. This forms the basic point of departure in the *ubuntu* notion of “I am a person through other persons.” The *ubuntu* society could, therefore, be described as a primary caring of society where people are cared for in times of misfortune.

Health, counselling and welfare services are considered very important in *ubuntu* society. The *ubuntu* culture provides a sense of belonging to all people: the extended family takes care of widows, orphans, the happy, the ill and poor (Broodryk 1997:74).

*Ubuntu*, in the sense of welfare and as a social concept, is centred on humankind and the central position of people in society. Society is seen as an extension of the basic family unit, which is communistic, mutual and provides an inclusive way of life. In such an inclusive society people live close to one another and they depend on each other. It also means that they respect others as equals. Through the sharing of commodities and surpluses they demonstrate their strong sense of caring for each other.

As far as respect for human rights is concerned, respect (*ukuhlonipha*) as a quality of *ubuntu*, may be seen as important in both political and institutional structures. Respect appears to be the most central theme throughout the *ubuntu-botho* syllabus, which was prescribed to schools and colleges in Zululand (Mdluli 1987:67).

According to Mdluli (1987: 67) one of *ubuntu*'s essential qualities, as dealt with in the *ubuntu* syllabus, is respect for authority, and four sub-themes are described within this concept of respect, namely:

- youth should respect elders and do as they are told without question;
- the man is the head of the family and the woman knows that she is not equal to her husband: she is inferior;
- Respect should be shown to authority, irrespective of whether one agrees or not with the views of the authority figure. In order that things go smoothly in all kinds of work situations, there are always people appointed to manage such undertakings. If one is at work, no matter what job one does, 'even in the mines', it should be remembered that one must respect at all times those in more senior positions, and
- The law has to be respected and strictly respected.

*Ukuhlonipha* (respect) is thus seen as the very essence of *ubuntu*, but this runs counter to the notion of mass democracy, as all actions are to be executed within the tightly defined *ukuhlonipha* relations.

#### **2.4.4 *Ubuntu*: education, respect and obedience**

Two styles of teaching *ubuntu* may be distinguished in the field of education, respect and obedience, namely the verbal transfer from generation to generation, and formal verbal/written school education. Traditionally the husband is the head of the household and the wife realises that she is not equal to the husband. She addresses her husband as "Father" and in doing so, the couple's children are given an example of how to behave. A woman does not cross words with a man and should she do this, it reflects a bad image of her, namely a poorly developed sense of *ubuntu*. Women are thus inferior to men (Mdluli 1987:67).



An analogy is also found between the hierarchical relations in the family and the leadership of a public organisation and especially the obedience to the leader (Mduli 1987:64). The obedience to the leader is also reflected in other spheres of life: people are appointed to take control in schools, hospitals, government departments, police etc. When one is at work – irrespective of one's career – *ubuntu* requires one to respect at all times those who have been appointed as supervisors. If one's ideas and interests clash with those of the senior colleague, one should behave as the minor party, in other words in obedience.

Discipline is another important attribute of *ubuntu*. One cannot associate *ubuntu* with aggression, disorder or chaos. Nevertheless, openness should prevail, and its absence could result in disorder where there is a lack of discipline. This may lead to conflict between leader and followers. Openness allows for spontaneous participation and trust. The latter goes hand in hand with the possibility of reaching consensus after discussion, and it also allows for pragmatic approaches (Broodryk 1997:49).

An appreciation of honour and shame is important to understand education, respect and obedience in an *ubuntu* society. Honour and shame may be described as “socially proper attitudes and behaviour in the area where the lines of power, gender, status and religion intersect” (Malina 1993:31). Honour is a claim to worth that is publicly acknowledged. In a society where *ubuntu* functions, there is a high degree of regard for reputation and respect. An effort should always be made to act in a manner that will not bring shame and ridicule to individuals, families, clans or tribes. According to Zulu (1998:19) this is so because “honour can either be ascribed to a person or acquired through excelling in one's society. Being shamed involves a loss of repute and worth in the eyes of others, especially of one's peers.”

Respect is thus an important feature of *ubuntu* and it relates to discipline, law and order. *Ukuhlonipha* is said to embrace a number of customary rules that govern relationships at different levels of society: it lays down the authority of the elders over the young; parents over children; leaders over followers; men over women and emphasises respect not only for people one knows, but even for those who are not

known. It appears to be a closed form of respect in the sense that strict adherence to these rules is demanded.

With regard to respect Chinkanda (1994:3) states: "We usually speak of someone as having *ubuntu* meaning that such a person has and demonstrates in his daily life the presence of positive qualities which are conducive to good neighbourliness, brotherhood and positive human relations. A person with *ubuntu* is someone who is concerned with his/her fellow beings; the person wants less for himself/herself and more for them. To be considered as not having *ubuntu* is a very serious state in the black culture. It has all sorts of negative connotations and means that a person so labelled is incapable of committing acts that are considered undesirable in society."

These descriptions are unfortunately not supported by concrete verification and remain abstract. More important though is the spirit of brotherhood, caring and obedience to the *ubuntu* concept, where all people are regarded and treated as equals.

The role of education is particularly emphasised in *ubuntu* because it is seen as the most important means of combating the many problems in urban areas. People who are jobless and who are discharged are usually uneducated. Educated people normally have the means to stave off poverty, because they are in a position to establish small businesses and provide work for others. *Ubuntu* encourages pupils and students to study hard, and hence *ubuntu* may be the driving force behind many illiterate persons attending evening schools to learn to read and write (Mdluli 1987:64).

If there is a lack of learning culture, *ubuntu* has a major role to play in encouraging education. Broodryk argues that this encouragement is also not unique: it is generally accepted that education is necessary. It is different though, because in the African context education may be regarded as a Western phenomenon: the traditional schooling of Africans does not provide for literacy programmes and other western ideals. The initiation schools, for instance, teach life and survival skills and rules (Broodryk 1997:68).



In the *ubuntu* system children are taught that they are expected to do everything that is required of them by the father and the mother, as well as all elders at home who have the authority to control family affairs. This reference to the authority of elders is a way of ordering young society. It is unthinkable that elders in Western society, who are not the parents of the children concerned, would be allowed to exercise authority to the extent accepted in African societies. Chiefs play a significant role in the application of discipline of young people, as they organise impis to discipline the young (Rutch 1995:11).

African cultures provides a sense of belonging to all its people and it is possible to accommodate everybody. Hence there is no person who does not belong: belonging is the root and essence of being and the ordering of society is based on this fact (Setiloane 1989:10). African people are group orientated and family relations are therefore very important. Consequently large families are encouraged in peasant societies, since production is dependent on family labour (Hyden 1983:197).

The extended African family is a large domestic cluster, consisting of several elementary or nuclear families, each comprising of a husband, wife and dependants. These nucleus families create family structures, which are quite strange, compared to Western family structures. People in Africa do not restrict the title “father” to their male parent. They also address their father’s brothers as “father”. And they call their mother’s sisters “mother” also. A father’s sisters would be addressed as “aunt” and a mother’s brothers as “uncle”. “Brothers” would include not only the male children of a person’s father but also certain cousins and even members of the same clan who have no blood relationship to a African person at all.

## **2.5 Examples of wisdom in dialogue with *ubuntu* as reflected in African Proverbs**

As indicated before, much of the language and thoughts of Africans are expressed in proverbs. In many ways, African traditional proverbs are remarkably similar to those of other peoples and different cultures. In common with others, African proverbs are short sayings which contain the wisdom and experiences of the people of old. Although there are also long proverbs - which resemble short stories or poems - the overwhelming majority of African proverbs are short, pithy statements.

Although this dissertation does not explore African proverbs, a few are used as examples of wisdom in dialogue with *ubuntu*. The following proverbs originated within the Tonga culture and were taken from the compilation of African Proverbs found on CD-ROM (Nussbaum 1996). It points toward a dialogue between wisdom and *ubuntu* on the level of parental teaching.

### **2.5.1 *Chinjeru chendi ndamwene.***

I have the wisdom, I can do it.

Explanation: A person who is self-conceited does not follow other people's advice.

Meaning: It is dangerous to despise or neglect someone's advice.

Occasion: The proverb is cited when rebuking a person who got into trouble after ignoring another's advice.

Related theme in Proverbs 1-9:

Stupid people have not respect for wisdom and refuse to learn (Proverbs 1:7).

### **2.5.2 *Boza liwele mweneko.***

A lie returns to the one who tells it.

Explanation: Liars are frequently exposed in the community.

Meaning: You should not tell lies about people in their absence, since such lies are bound to be exposed and you will thereby become ashamed of yourself.

Occasion: This proverb is usually cited in courts where the accused persons bear false witness against others. It is used to advise someone to stop telling lies. Young people are warned against telling lies.

Related theme in Proverbs 1-9:

One of the seven things that the Lord hates and cannot tolerate is "a witness who tells one lie after another" (Proverbs 6:19).

### **2.5.3 *Mazu gha wala ghayanana ndi sabora wakali mweniyo wawawa cha.***

The words from elders are like old chili which does not turn sour.

Explanation: People should heed the advice of the elders.



Meaning: A wise saying reconciles a disturbed mind; therefore, one should not show contempt for old people's wisdom.

Occasion: The proverb is cited when advising young people to follow the advice of older people.

Related themes in Proverbs 1-9:

My son, keep my words and treasure up my commandments with you; keep my commandments and live (Proverbs 7:1).

My son, be attentive to my wisdom, incline your ear to my understanding that you may keep discretion (Proverbs 5:1-2).

## 2.6 A preliminary conclusion

Africa's contribution to new and creative views on obedience is based on processes of production and consumption that are people-centred and which meet both their material and also social and spiritual needs. The philosophy of *ubuntu* emanates from the organic relationship between the majority of the people, their spiritual roots and the natural world, and rests on the following insights:

- Humanity is an integral part of eco-systems, leading to communal responsibility to sustain life.
- Human worth is based on social, cultural and spiritual criteria and competence, rather than conventional marked-based conceptions.
- Natural resources are shared on the principle of equity among and between generations.

*Ubuntu* as a concept presumes a pre-modern sociological arrangement. It may be an appealing mode of life to many people in Southern Africa, but it is certainly not immediately applicable to the functioning of modern sociological systems. The origin of *ubuntu* relates to the intensity of positive human relations (Broodryk 1997:24). *Ubuntu* centres around the activities surrounding humanity or humanness. It is a form of worldview which is shaped by a value system based on obedience and respect. This system of obedience determines the way one approaches or responds to phenomena in the world. For instance the phenomenon of violence would be

approached in a sceptical way by the *ubuntuist* because *ubuntu* and obedience to the concept teaches peace in life.

Simplified, the concept underpins the very communal nature of African society and by extension, its ethics. The well-being of the individual and his or her interests are bolstered through the community where the latter becomes a web of relationships. This is well expressed in the Zulu saying, *Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu* ("You are a person through others"). In other words, the well-being of the individual and his/her interests are concretised by means of the community.

As an ethical principle, *ubuntu* places a high value on sound human relations. Thus in traditional societies no one is a stranger, and hospitality to strangers and the spirit of sharing are respected values amongst the members of such a community.

Instruction and learning on the basis of *ubuntu* values are unique in many respects and *ubuntu* values play a more prominent role than normally recognised in the historically Western education tradition, prevalent in South Africa to the present day. Spurred on by dramatic changes in South Africa – especially the worldwide impact of Nelson Mandela – the traditional African philosophy of *ubuntu* has spurred a renaissance that is reaching all parts of the continent (Mbigi & Maree: 1994).

An African person is defined by the interaction with these different *ntu* or beings. He or she works in such a way that there is harmony in the universe of beings. There is harmony when there is a balance or equilibrium of force between different beings. Even fear can contribute to the establishment of harmony.

Ubuntu defines the individual in terms of his/her relationship with others (Shutte 1993:46). According to this definition, individuals only exist in their relationships with others, and as these relationships change, so do the characters of the individuals. Thus understood, the word "individual" signifies a plurality of personalities corresponding to the multiplicity of relationships in which the individual in question stands. Being an individual by definition means "being-with-others". "With-others", as Macquarrie rightly observes, "...is not added on to a pre-existent and self-sufficient



being; rather, both this being (the self) and the others find themselves in a whole wherein they are already related" (1972:104).

Ubuntu inspires us to expose ourselves to others, to encounter the difference of their humanness so as to inform and enrich our own. Thus understood, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* translates as: "To be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others in its infinite variety of content and form" (Van der Merwe 1996:1; Ramose 1999:193).

*Ubuntu* unites the self and the world in a peculiar web of mutual relations in which subject and object become indistinguishable, and in which "I think, therefore I am", is substituted for "I participate, therefore I am" (Shutte 1993:47). This is all somewhat boggling for the Cartesian mind, whose conception of individuality now has to move from solitary to solidarity, from independence to interdependence, from individuality vis-à-vis community to individuality à la community.

The concern in this dissertation is not to reflect on some cosmological ethics, but to give a general background against which one could understand the traditional African value system in its communitarian and socio-ethical character. There is a general agreement among Africans, and even non-African scholars on the fact that the African person cannot be defined except in reference to the community.

The relationship between the individual and the community, or the social nature of the African, has its roots deep in the ontology I have just articulated. This relationship has been expressed differently.

Viewed as an expression of hope for a better future, *ubuntu* creates a moral community, admission to which is not necessarily limited by biological ancestry, or nationality.

The major questions remains: Can this understanding of *ubuntu* be expected to make a difference in Old Testament wisdom literature? The next chapter will focus on wisdom literature in order to bring us closer to an answer on the significance of *ubuntu* within wisdom theology.

## CHAPTER 3: Wisdom as worldview in wisdom literature

### 3.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to seek for explanations in the interpretation of the concept of wisdom, to extrapolate some generalisations from them and to gain a greater awareness and a deeper understanding of social reality of Old Testament wisdom. This chapter will thus be focused on the worldview presented in Old Testament wisdom literature in gaining a better understanding of the idea of wisdom in ancient Israel. We foresee that many of the insights gained in this chapter will later provide valuable knowledge for the dialogue between of wisdom and *ubuntu*. In the next chapter we will focus on Proverbs 1, 8 & 9.

In one form or another, all of the wisdom texts anticipated a time to come when children would be eager to learn and to raise questions regarding the community: What did it mean to be Israelites? Why did we live the way we lived and did what we did? The answer, in various settings, was to tell the story of this community, the long and deep memory which started with some rather insignificant people who were surprised by their transformation and became a community through God's historical process (cf. Deut. 10:22). This community had a distinct identity that was in considerable tension with the values and the presuppositions of the dominant communities of the region. The primary subject matter of instruction in wisdom focused on the subject of what this distinct identity entailed.

In its understanding of how truth is revealed and perceived, wisdom made very distinctive assumptions of its own. The preserved teachings of wisdom reveal a very different manner of appeal from those of either prophecy or priesthood. Clements argues: "It is not surprising therefore that wisdom has often appeared to be a-religious, and at times even bordering on the secular approach to life. The overall impression concerning wisdom has therefore been profoundly interesting, and at times challenging, feature of ancient Israelite culture, but one which was in most respects marginal to the growth and development of Israel's religion" (1991:22).



Since post-exilic Israel no longer enjoyed the governmental privileges of a royal house of its own, it is evident that the Jewish wisdom teaching spread its claims far beyond the immediate circle of the royal court. Clements is of the opinion that we may use a provisional assumption that Israelite wisdom passed through three distinct phases. The first of these concerned the earliest Israelite traditions of folk wisdom and is the least definable and clear-cut in character. This emerged within families and clans and provided practical advice and intellectual impulse. It incorporated several aspects of family life, being pragmatic and respectful of the authority of the family headed by the father.

During the period of the monarchy in Israel, wisdom came to be especially nurtured in the royal court. With this shift, wisdom passed into a second phase. This does not require that wisdom became exclusively a prerogative of the royal court and its administrators, but it underwent formative changes in this context. Wisdom took on a character of "royal wisdom" in which the king was seen as an exponent of wisdom. The third phase of Israelite wisdom development took place after the exile (Clements 1991:28).

This third phase can be perceived as the most consistently literary stage of wisdom growth, producing such a literary jewel as the Book of Job. It also witnessed the composition of the longer didactic poems of Proverbs 1-9 and led to the collection and literary shaping of the Book of Proverbs as a whole. By the latter half of the third century BC the author of the biblical book of Ecclesiastes (Qohelet) was active and reflecting deeply and provocatively upon Judaism's inherited tradition of wisdom (Lasor *et al* 1982:528).

It is this third, post exilic phase of development of wisdom in Israel that will occupy most of our attention in this dissertation. The reason lies in the fact that this period has brought about the essence of wisdom in a fixed literary form.

Biblical wisdom literature is Israel's contribution to that vast body of written and oral sayings that made sagacious observations about life and set down in memorable form certain rules for success and happiness. Customarily two main types of wisdom writings may be distinguished. Proverbial wisdom is found in short, pithy sayings,

which state rules for personal happiness and welfare or condense the wisdom of experience and make crucial observations about life. Secondly one encounters contemplative or speculative wisdom - monologues, dialogues, or essays which delve into basic problems of human existence, such as the meaning of life and suffering (Lasor *et al* 1982:534). "In the broader sense of 'wisdom' as 'didactic or instructive literature', Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are clearly the three great contributions of Israel's sages to the Old Testament" (Lasor *et al* 1982:545).

If one had to design a cover for each of the three canonical wisdom books, drawn from their own contents, one may represent them by the various houses they describe. For Proverbs it could appropriately be the seven-pillared house of Wisdom, or better still, that gracious, well-stocked home of the accomplished wife, whose virtues bring the book to its serene close. For Job, a very different picture emerges: perhaps the wreckage in which his family perished when "a great wind came across the wilderness, and struck the four corners of the house"; or perhaps even the ash heap to which he banished himself. As for Ecclesiastes, its insistence on the transience of earthly glory could hardly find a better symbol than its own description of a great house (12:3-4) in the grip of slow, inexorable decay (Kidner 1985:116).

The centre of attention for the study of Old Testament wisdom is primarily to be found in the Book of Proverbs. This represents a collection of wisdom teachings which reaches back to its ancient origins in Israel and which has been made in order to preserve its major insights. Following a widely adopted conclusion among scholars, we may accept that wisdom – as described above – first emerged in Israel in the pre-exilic period. Many scholars have been inclined to comply with the Israelite historical tradition that the age of Solomon marked the beginning of the Israelite wisdom tradition.

Between them, the three Wisdom books clearly cover three aspects of existence that no one could afford to overlook: the demands of practical good management; the enigma of calamities that are beyond control or explanation; and the tantalising hollowness and brevity of human life. The three books, explicitly labelled "wisdom", provide the backdrop for a consideration of wisdom themes occurring throughout the



Hebrew canon. Themes, forms and vocabulary common to these books qualify as markers of wisdom materials.

Israel's wisdom teachers were primarily students of the universe. They studied Yahweh's creation to determine order and commence human conduct, which would sustain that order socially and cosmologically. Within this impossibly broad range the wisdom teachers pursued a number of modest aims.

The principle goals of the wisdom thinker were to reduce broad truth to a simple statement or image; to establish priorities that distinguish the wise, and thus to define wisdom; to identify and discuss key philosophical questions or problematic issues; to persuade the foolish and the ignorant to search for life's truths and in other ways to pursue conscientious living; to mark the impasses (God's sovereignty, mysteries of nature, etc.); to share proven insights on practical matters; to warn against excesses and foster temperance (e.g. alcohol, food, sexual conduct, anger); to define virtue and vice; to teach joy in living; to praise wisdom as the greatest good; and finally to complement conventional theology by increasing personal awareness of propriety (Berry 1995:19,20).

The principle goals of wisdom cannot operate independently of the formation of character in traditions transmitted and shaped by the community. Principles and rules are part and parcel of the dynamics of character formation in that they contribute to the community's task of providing particular conceptions of the good through which character is formed (Brown 1996:14).

Wisdom celebration could be reduced to basic categories. Wisdom has intelligent competence - insight, discernment, the ability to make plans, understanding. Further wisdom has moral qualities - wisdom hates arrogance, self-love and wicked speech and wisdom has power (Lang 1986:74).

It is important to take note that in the ancient Near East real power and responsibility were vested in the gods and kings. It is not surprising to find both Yahweh and the

idealised Israelite king equipped with the same qualities: wisdom, moral insight and power.<sup>2</sup>

### 3.2 Defining Wisdom

A distinctly worldly concept, namely wisdom – or some similar notion – is found among all peoples. Wisdom unites, rather than divides people. Wisdom, a secular concept, became a component of both Testaments of the Bible, because it is inherent in creation – more specifically, human creation (Westermann 1995:1).

The Hebrew term חכמה, usually interpreted as 'wisdom', may be used to indicate the educational climate of the Israelite school. In English we distinguish between a “smart guy” and a wise experienced person. On the one hand, we recognise a “smart guy” for superior abilities in dealing with practical, everyday problems. He is quick to react correctly at the appropriate time and knows how to deal with people. Yet we do not value just being smart too highly. On the other hand we count wisdom, the quality of a mature personality, among our highest values (Lang 1986:13).

In addition to intelligence and wisdom, חכמה refers to technical expertise, the knowledge and competence needed to carry out a specific activity. Wisdom is needed in dealing both with material objects and human beings. It is worth noting that not only the Hebrew term, but also the Greek and the Middle High German (*wîsheit*), use a single term to indicate the meaning of practical, mechanical skill as well as intellectual ability. Thus *wîsheit* does not only mean knowledge based on experience, the ability to counsel and make decisions, courtly manners, and rhetorical skill, but also mastery in the crafts. Wisdom thus means competence (Lang 1986:14).

Von Rad (1972:4) begins his study of wisdom in Israel by showing that experiential roots underlie the human desire for knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Gordon (1975:38) argues that the sapiential literature does not contain an ordered body of doctrine and is not all

<sup>2</sup> 2 Kings 23:7

<sup>3</sup> G. von Rad 1972. *Wisdom in Israel*. London:SCM, p 4: "Not only does the outside world as an object stimulate man's desire for knowledge; its movements and reactions affect him and, at the same time subject him to influences. In any event, man must know his way in the world in which he finds himself in order to be able to hold his own in it."



systematic. There are no dogmatics *per se* contained in the sages' writings and indeed their work is but one strand in the Old Testament. That one strand does not contain a balanced and comprehensive treatment of all the theological concerns of the Israelite.

The wisdom writings thus became part of the tradition concerning the revealed truth of the Lord and it took on features which were strikingly distinctive, when compared with the inherited themes and concepts of its older oriental antecedents. As Clements (1991:19) puts it: "The search for wisdom became a quest for an authentically Jewish affirmation of theological and ethical truth."

One may derive from the above that the Creator bestowed on human beings the capability of finding his/her own way through life and of understanding him/herself, of distinguishing between good or evil, beneficial or destructive. Wisdom is thus related to God's actions of blessing, and so it may grow as it accompanies and dwells within a person (Westermann 1995:1). For this reason, it is especially acknowledged among older persons.

Its differences with the legal and prophetic strands of thought help to define wisdom. Those qualities (social standing, instruction and worldview) which characterise its major proponents provide the platform for such definitions. Using the corrective nature of wisdom to guide its definition, wisdom challenged contemporary adherents of the biblical canon to account for diverse perspectives.

According to such a view, neither the sages nor the wisdom movement in general may be characterised as secular, rather than sacred. Responses to outside stimuli determine the religious character of wisdom, rather than internal characteristics (such as a secular approach). Nor could wisdom be characterised as predominantly early or late, since the corrective of wisdom is present in earliest traditions. The Hebrew Bible presents no clear evolutionary development of wisdom (Berry 1995:91).

A wise or smart person is open-minded, willing to learn, disciplined, and therefore an ultimately successful student. Wisdom is not inherited, but has to be acquired through learning. Wisdom have their foundation in the didactic surroundings (Lang 1986:15). It is not a premeditated fabricated literary work, but a compilation of didactic poetry,

a collection of brief discourses and poems for use in teaching. In other words the teachers did not have to follow an assigned series.

Brown (1996:36) argues that wisdom's concrete self-description does not end with the profiling of a normative character. Wisdom rises to the cosmic realm as it places itself at the very beginning of God's creative acts. It was created by Yahweh, brought forth from birth before the rest of creation. The creative acts all point to wisdom's primordial nature. "...the point of such cosmogonic language is to focus not so much on the process of creation as on wisdom's position in relation to creation and God. Wisdom's focus on her relationship to God and creation marks the culmination of her character description" (Brown 1996:36). The order of creation thus plays a defining role in the development of an ethical character and in the understanding of the concept of wisdom.

### **3.3 The correspondence between the call to wisdom in Deuteronomy and Wisdom Literature**

An entirely different aspect of wisdom which I examined in my B.D and M.Th studies presents itself in Deuteronomy 6:1-25. Deuteronomy displays moral associations with wisdom. Its moral tone shows similarities to the direct instructions in Proverbs 1-9, as does reference to *יִרְאַת יְהוָה*. This phrase plays a prominent role in Proverbs 1-9, though it is common throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.

Blessing (Deut 6:3) promised for proper conduct appears similar to the emphasis of Psalm 1 (a wisdom Psalm) and certain proverbs. This feature appears commonly in both deuteronomic and wisdom literature. This indicates some shared interests, rather than a direct dependence on wisdom traditions or dependence on deuteronomistic theology by wisdom writers. In Deuteronomy 11:8-21, a passage partially parallel to Deuteronomy 6:1-25, additional emphasis is placed upon the retribution encountered by those who heed or do not heed the call to religious obligation (Berry 1995:99). Weinfeld (1972:1) argues that this style is distinguished by its simplicity, fluency and lucidity and may be recognised both by its phraseology and more especially by its rhetorical character.



Wisdom themes, vocabulary and concerns are thus not limited to the basic wisdom canon of Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Deuteronomy blends wisdom forms and terminology with prophetic forms and terminology to support the view that prosperity is linked to obedience (Berry 1995:15). Murphy argues that Deuteronomy seems at first sight not to be a prime choice to illustrate the influence of wisdom (1996:104). Weinfeld, however, has argued that “it is more plausible to assume that the book of Deuteronomy was influenced by the ancient sapiential ideology that found expression in the book of Proverbs and the wisdom literature of the ancient Near East” (Weinfeld 1991:297).

A theme common to wisdom and Deuteronomy is life. Life is the kerygma of the book of Proverbs and it is the great promise of wisdom: the good life, longevity, a large family, prestige, joy and land (Murphy 1996:3-14). The same vision permeates Deuteronomy where this emphasis arises from the covenant that is at the heart of Deuteronomic preaching and not from the wisdom perspective (Murphy 1996:104). The goal of wisdom and the promise of Deuteronomy are basically the same. It should be remembered that this perspective is not absent from the promises of the prophets (e.g. Amos 5:6, 14), or from the ideals of the ancient Near Eastern cultures.

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 carries the force of blessing or curse dependent upon the response to the laws it assumes. Passages such as 11:8-17 threaten disaster or blessing depending on the relevant behaviour.

Proverbs promise similar threats or blessings to the wicked or righteous, as illustrated in **Proverbs 2:20-22**

לִמְעַן תֵּלֶךְ בְּדֶרֶךְ טוֹבִים וְאַרְחוֹת צְדִיקִים תִּשְׁמֹר: <sup>20</sup>

כִּי־יֵשְׁרִים יִשְׁכְּנוּ־אֶרֶץ וְתַמִּימִים יֵיתְרוּ בָּהּ: <sup>21</sup>

וְרָשָׁעִים מֵאֶרֶץ יִכְרֹתוּ וּבֹגְדִים יִסְחוּ מִמֶּנָּה: <sup>22</sup>

[20] *So you will walk in the way of good men  
and keep to the paths of the righteous.*

[21] *For the upright will inhabit the land,  
and men of integrity will remain in it;*

*[22] but the wicked will be cut off from the land,  
and the treacherous will be rooted out of it.*  
(Revised Standard Version)

The calling is to walk in the way of the good and keep to the paths of the just. For the upright will abide in the land, and the innocent will remain in it; but the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the treacherous will be rooted out of it (Murphy 1996:105).

This two-sided blessing-curse continuum applies to wisdom, as well as the Torah. The ability to make choices which lead to blessing distinguishes the wise from the foolish. In much of the wisdom literature a very fine line separates wisdom as the source of correct living and wisdom as equal to correct living. Deuteronomy identifies keeping the Torah with wisdom, and merges obedience and discernment: “You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the people, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!” (Deuteronomy 4:6)

Wisdom expressed in terms of the choice between obedience and disobedience appeared inherently in the Torah itself. The sense of moral responsibility Deuteronomy encourages, relate directly to the human activity of choosing wisdom and obedience (Berry 1995:16). This is not a radical departure from the approach of other wisdom books, since all assume or imply that wisdom’s source is God and the human component consists of tuning one’s life and intellect to his frequency.

Murphy argues that “the didactic mood of Deuteronomy is matched in many places by the intensity of speech in Proverbs, as a comparison of Deut 6:7-9; 11:18-20 with Proverbs 6:20-22; 7:3; 8:34 and other verses readily demonstrates. Words like listen, heart, teach and discipline are frequent in both Deuteronomy and the wisdom literature” (1996:105).

*יְהוָה יִרְאַת* is another principle that is common to wisdom and Deuteronomy. Murphy (1996:105) argues that covenantal love and fear are intertwined. This precise nuance does not appear in the wisdom literature until Ben Sira (e.g. Sira 2:15-17;



Ecclesiastes 12:13) Thus Murphy (1996:280) comments, "Fearing God all the days means constant awareness of God. No wonder, then, that the author of Deuteronomy exhorts the Israelites not to forget the Lord (6:12; 8:12-13; 17:16-20; cf 31:20; 32:13-15)." The notion that affluence and society bring one to deny and forget God also emanates from wisdom ideology.

Before Weinfeld, several scholars pointed out the similarities in form, content, style and terminology between Deuteronomy and wisdom. These studies were not carried out in great detail and the conclusions of some of them were more modest in that they only referred to some wisdom influence on Deuteronomy. The search for wisdom influence has not been restricted to Deuteronomy, for wisdom influence was recently discovered also in narrative texts, in the laws, and in various prophets of the Old Testament.

Lohfink (1977:40) accepts that there was such an inflation of oaths and treaties that even the man in the street would have been acquainted with them: they were part and parcel of the culture.<sup>4</sup> We may conclude that although such statements are difficult to prove, there may be some truth contained in them. In addition to such possibilities, one should not forget that there also existed a long covenantal tradition in Israel.

With regard to the specific wisdom elements in Deuteronomy, it could be said that there is a clear distinction should be made between scribes and sages. Scribes were found in all educated classes of Israelite society. And those who had the title of scribe performed different functions in the administration of the kingdom, the palace, etc. It is to be expected that wisdom elements would appear in various kinds of literature since all educated classes disposed of some wisdom. Therefore, we ought not to consider priests, prophets and sages in terms of watertight compartments and differentiate between them so sharply that all contact between them would have been impossible.

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<sup>4</sup> N Lohfink, *Unsere grossen Wörter*, Freiburg-Basel-Vienna, 1977, p 40: "Jedenfalls gehörte es damals im Bewusstsein der Judäer zu einer überlegenen Kultur von Verträgen durchwaltet zu sein... das könnte man dem Mann auf der Strasse nicht mehr rauben."

Weinfeld's notion is reinforced by his conception of ancient wisdom before Deuteronomy as native shrewdness, persuasive speech, cunning, pragmatic talent and the possession of extraordinary knowledge. The authors of Deuteronomy "conceive wisdom in an entirely novel manner" that indeed reflects a turning point in the Israelite conception of wisdom. They invaded the field of religion and they studied the Law as indicated in Jer 8:8 (Weinfeld 1972:245).

The only argument with regard to the wisdom influence in Deuteronomy, concerns the terminology and perhaps some of the ideas of Deuteronomy that also occur in wisdom literature. But here again the situation is rather complex. If wisdom was not the private property of the sages, but the common property of all educated classes, it seems natural enough for at least some of its ideas and part of its terminology to be shared by other authors.

Although the consequences of good or bad actions may usually be readily identified, what broader principles determine the "goodness" and the "badness" of such actions is less easily defined (Clements 1991:37). Attempts to establish universally applicable rules display strong limitations and the *torah*-centred morality of Deuteronomy may be said to contain within itself inevitable weaknesses. It is also observable that the strong emphasis set out in Deuteronomy 5-9 on the necessity for obedience to the *torah* displays a consciousness that, where the will to adhere to is lacking, the law itself becomes ineffective.

We conclude this section by affirming that the book of Deuteronomy contains laws which have almost literal parallels in both Israelite and non-Israelite wisdom literature. Several scholars have called attention to these parallels, but they seem to have reversed the order of things by concluding that the Biblical wisdom literature was influenced by the book of Deuteronomy, instead of the other way round. This conclusion is based on the presupposition current in Biblical scholarship during the early decades of the twentieth century that the book of Deuteronomy antedated the book of Proverbs. This supposition was groundless, as proved by the discovery of wisdom compositions which clearly demonstrate that Israelite wisdom teaching is substantially of ancient origin and consequently antedates the book of Deuteronomy (Weinfeld 1972:260).



### 3.4 Wisdom as worldview

The term worldview has become very popular in the vocabulary of most disciplines. It is a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true, or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the makeup of our world.

Worldview is a set of beliefs about the most important issues of life, a comprehensive view of existence, a construct about the makeup of life as it struggles with the questions of reality, truth, ethics, and history, a fundamental framework through which we view life and the world, the structure by means of which you integrate and interpret all of experience - your set of presuppositions about the world (Nash 1992:16; Fowler 1990: 5-8, 30, 31).

Worldview however, is not just a theoretical construct, but also a framework which impacts upon one's whole approach to life. It is not merely a vision of life but a vision for life, providing a model of the world, which guides its adherents in the world. It forms the basis of our beliefs; determines our values, and guides our conduct; it conditions people's entire range of thought and action; it provides a point of departure from where we can describe people; it gives a sense of direction and a focus of destination; it maintains the unity and coherence of life and give meaning and direction to all activities and events.

In the worldview of Old Testament wisdom literature the word "wise" and related adjectives arise when signifying general or special skill at some craft. Those who have natural talent and who acquired expertise in weaving, shipbuilding, mourning, metalwork and the like, are designated wise. Such persons hold wisdom to accomplish a particular task (Crenshaw 1998:20).

If we are correct in presupposing that the wise constituted a particular class within the worldview of Israel, we may make another assumption: that these sages used a characteristic mode of dialogue. It follows that the literary forms within Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes comprise a special world of communication, which could be understood in terms of its own classification (Crenshaw 1998:55).

The phrase “to help a man to become himself” epitomises much of the significance of wisdom as worldview. Wisdom could thus easily be misunderstood, and there are also other purposes that could be documented, but the aim to humanise humanity is a major part of the intent of wisdom. Von Rad suggests somewhat the same when he declared that what is needed is a “way of functioning...which lets each one value who he is” and he continues to describe this approach: “It is a dialogue, not as a technique but as a way of life” (Von Rad 1975:4, 5).

Wisdom as worldview can humanise the cult and the law, while the praxis of life allowed the clear light of reason to shine when any aspect of Israel’s ongoing existence became obscurantist or legalistic. The prophets also had the benefit of the influence of wisdom.

Wisdom with its wide variety and motives, may give stimulus to the notion that there is a need for every person to formulate his/her own relationship with his/her Maker (Gordon 1975:90). Wisdom relates to successful living, regardless of how that may be interpreted. Both Brueggemann (1997) and Murphy (1983) see “life” itself as central to wisdom’s message. Life was bigger than the law, cult or tabernacle. Perhaps the sages saw the wider picture which consists of man’s life and the many interests which all constitute real parts of that life.

A religious person comes to moral decisions with the help of faith and reason. The experience in no sense excludes a life of faith. When faith and reason strengthen one another there is real confirmation for a given course of action (Von Rad 1975:3-10).

Brown (1996:152) argues that from a character standpoint, wisdom starts from a central, familiar locale that provides security and identity. “But the moral subject does not remain in this position for long; it moves into certain realms of liminality, to the frontiers of community, creation and knowledge which can pose particular dangers.”

In Proverbs, according to the familial spirit of wisdom, the son is instructed to avoid all that is strange and wicked as he steers his way through the larger community.



Wisdom provides the inextricable link between family and community, no less youth and age. As the straight pathway to maturity, she gently and gradually replaces the parental hand of guidance that has brought the child to the threshold of adulthood (Crenshaw 1998:58).

Unlike the proverbial son's journey, the movement of Job's peculiar character requires a deconstruction of the traditional norms and marks of character. Through circuitous deliberations Job replaces his posture of humble submission with one of grievance and protest. Like wisdom's leading the son outward into the community, Yahweh offers Job a new vision of cosmic community that explodes his restrictive moral worldview (Brown 1996:153).

We find a different look at worldview in Job and Qohelet, which we will look at in this chapter, where the question is posed whether there is any purpose to effort and existence in this world. Unlike Job, Qohelet cannot identify himself with the strangeness of creation and consequently finds his liberation through a process of character formation.

### **3.5 Wisdom as worldview and the religious community**

Murphy (1983:3) argues that there are many contemporary factors that have served to stimulate interest in the study of wisdom and the religious community. These may include the notion that this post-modern age is simultaneously a time of reason, and also an age of doubt. This is an age when there is both an interest in humankind and also awareness that people on their own cannot solve their problems.

In the Israelite worldview, wisdom displays characteristics which establish its affinity with a much wider search for wisdom and understanding in the ancient Near East. One should be careful not to interpret the wisdom of Israel exclusively on the basis of "wisdom" as an international phenomenon. Nevertheless, similarities and identical formulations with regard to wisdom may be found in other cultures such as African *ubuntu*, as we shall argue later. According to Nel (1981:418) identity in formulation is not necessarily an identity of content. Matching features in different cultures should be interpreted in relation to the peculiarities of each culture.

To say that the contemporary world is pluralistic is common knowledge. Indications are that while the world is growing increasingly smaller – because of improved communications, travel, interdependence of economies and many other developments – its people will also become increasingly pluralistic. As we face developments in the world, we need to acknowledge that religion is one of the most powerful forces in shaping society. Its influence may be felt in every area of societal life. Religion is a strong motivating force. Society also influences religion.

Religion as part of worldview consists of many facets. In Western society much emphasis has traditionally been placed on formal beliefs that have been transmitted through formal learning situations. Although this approach is changing, the content of religious belief is still considered very important. Other important facets of religion include ritual, religious experience and community.

The book of Proverbs for example was considered to be a specifically religious book, which was to be appreciated primarily on the basis of its concept of God and of its piety. In the past scholars felt obligated to deduce from the book of Proverbs that there had been a decided loss of religious content in the post-exilic period. Since the results of these researches were not exactly satisfactory, some researchers took exception to the rational, even opportunistic reflections (Clements 1991:15).

The Israelite wisdom tradition displays characteristics which establish its affinity with a much wider search for wisdom and understanding in the ancient Near East. Following the widely adopted conclusion among scholars, we may accept that wisdom first emerged in Israel in the pre-exilic period. People have been inclined to adhere to the Israelite historical tradition that the age of Solomon, if not the actual person of the king, marked the beginning of the Israelite wisdom tradition (Clements 1991:17). Before the inner eye of Israel stood a comprehensive paradigm of life spent in constant awareness of the centrality of God. This consciousness called Israel to complete obedience in all situations. It was kept ablaze in a language and in institutions of its own and was preserved for us both in Israel's central story and in a distinctive literature.

Wisdom was an intellectual-ethical pursuit resulting in a certain quality of life and in a literature with its own unique attributes. Ancient Israel shared in this international



quest. Notwithstanding, this extensive pursuit received its distinctive stamp in Israel and was firmly fixed into Israel's story of faith (Murphy 1983:4).

Three outstanding features may be distinguished in articulating the above:

1. Wisdom elements appear throughout the Old Testament, and not only in the wisdom books (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes).
2. Two of the three wisdom books (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes) are placed under the name of Solomon, as the legal codes are placed under that of Moses. Thus they are founded into the historical framework of Israel's story.
3. Wisdom is connected to Yahweh, the God who had chosen and redeemed Israel, with all the faith content associated with that name. Proverbs 1:7 expresses programmatically what usually marks Old Testament wisdom:

#### **Proverbs 1:7**

יִרְאַת יְהוָה רֵאשִׁית דָּעַת חֲכָמָה וּמוֹסָר אֲוִילִים בָּזוּ׃<sup>7</sup>

*[7] The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;*

*fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

(Revised Standard Version)

Fundamental to the Old Testament's understanding of wisdom is the assumption that God has constructed an orderly universe (Loader 1989:684). God's orders are embedded in its fabric and, if observed, are one venue of revealing God's will. Such observation of divine design, both in the natural and in the human sphere, through generations accumulates experience. To acquire such experience from one's elders and to draw on it at the proper time leads to life, understood first of all concretely as survival, health, descendants, success, prosperity on the land, peace, honour and so forth. To ignore it leads to death, that is, to failure, calamity, impoverishment, strife, dishonour and death.

Wisdom is nevertheless not only a basic attempt for profit and to avoid loss. It is an extensive ethical character ideal, namely to do what is right and to become a righteous person. It means to avoid evil and to avoid any association with the wicked. On the whole, the wisdom mentality of the Old Testament is optimistic, trusting that God's design of the world is inclined in favour of life. It is consequently possible to live appropriately and become righteous.

As selected texts are studied that point to the wisdom paradigm, the latter's subordinate role will again be discovered. It presents a vision of the right way that leads to life. This way becomes known through recognising God's design embedded in creation and through living harmoniously with that design (Loader 1989:684). When we ask about the substance of that life to which the way of wisdom leads, the relevant texts will take us again into the realm of the community and the responsibility towards the family paradigm.

The short proverbs of Proverbs 10-31 for example, are generally not addressed to anyone in particular, and the longer speeches of Proverbs 1-9 are styled as addresses from the older generation to the younger, from the wise teacher to "my son". This stands in some contrast to the priestly tutoring that applies at times to Israelites in general, when, for example, a distinction is drawn between pure and profane foods.

A more striking difference may be observed between the priestly focus on the act, and the wisdom emphasis on character. In Israel, the universe is in God's keeping, whereas individual wise or foolish actions gain their importance as they shape human character (Loader 1989:684). In keeping with this, the instructors of Proverbs 1-9 make an enthusiastic request for "transformation" to wisdom and a rejection of foolishness. It appears that an individual misjudgement on the part of a person considered wise would not immediately undo that status.

A distinctive feature of wisdom as worldview within the religious community, as compared with general ancient Near Eastern wisdom, is the emphasis that the former places on the person, rather than on the individual deed. The contrast between the ethically approved and the ethically condemned person may be expressed in many word pairs. In keeping with its emphasis on character, wisdom presents a nuanced



typology of character which we can study at different levels in the worldviews presented Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

### **3.6 Wisdom and worldview in Job**

The form of the Book of Job displays undeniable wisdom associations. The book presents Job's blamelessness as an affirmation of his wisdom. It presents his philosophical questions to God and friends which go beyond the personal crisis he faces. Job's reasoned arguments and those of his friends show a reflective approach to life (Habel 1983:142).

The tone of the book, which distinguishes it from Proverbs, marks it as a wisdom source as Job engages in the extended questioning of theology, rather than blind acceptance. The pessimistic attitude of the book's poetry reveals a philosophical bent in direct contrast to the positivistic tone of Proverbs. One could interpret the conflicting theme of Job as evidence that wisdom is a balance between questioning and orthodoxy (Berry 1995:141).

Loader (2001:83) argues that the Israelite idea of creation is the ordering of chaos. In the case of Job there are many signs of "the bewilderment of chaos." The book of Job is preoccupied with these human condition and its inevitabilities. From Job's perspective, knowledge belongs only to God. In the book of Job several proverbs appear, especially from Job's friends. It is interesting to note that Job's less orthodox perspective leads him to question God's fairness rather than quoting proverbs like his friends.

God's justice and theodicy appears as prominent themes. Berry accentuates the references to the "gate" as it provides some evidence of the Hebrew social setting. The court of elders, at times identified as sages, met near the gate of the city or village. These elders may have served as the official spokespersons for clan wisdom. All these clues indicate the wisdom associations of Job (Berry 1995:141).

According to Habel the author of Job, however, is a theologian and a poet. It seems appropriate, therefore, to take as our starting point the pivotal poem where his position is articulated (chapter 28). Ultimately this poem may be viewed as the poet's

own commentary on the efforts of the preceding participants to probe the hidden side of wisdom and understand the riddle of Job's case (Habel 1983:145).

The governing theme of this poem is the search for wisdom. This search is compared with the quest of mortals for precious gems and metals. In both quests three motifs dominate: the source or "place" of the precious item, the "way" or means of access to it, and the process of discovering it.

A close scrutiny of this passage reveals a number of key elements about the nature of wisdom: Wisdom is explicitly portrayed as a discrete entity with a "place" of its own and a "way" to that place (v.23). God "looks" to the ends of the earth to locate it (v.24). Finally he "sees", "appraises" and "probes" wisdom (v.27).

Hence wisdom is the principle or design which governs the activity to which it relates. The specific ordering activity of God described in this passage involves determining weights and measures (v 25), establishing "rules", and designing "ways" (Job 38:24-25) or laws according to which various celestial forces operate (v 26). In this creative "ordering" of things wisdom is obviously not one of these "laws" or "rules", but is discovered in their establishment. Wisdom should, therefore, be the basic overall design or principle which governs the laws or rules. It informs all "ordering" and is discovered in the process of ordering.

Berry (1995:11) argues that the approach to wisdom in Job resides in the shadows of Job's struggle with the problem.<sup>5</sup> Job also serves as the best example of our first unwieldy definition of wisdom – the exercise of mind as a religious pursuit. We may, therefore, state that wisdom expresses the human struggle for understanding of

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<sup>5</sup> Job's identification as a righteous, pious person (1:1; 42:7) links him to wise conduct so often praised or commended by a vast array of biblical proverbs. His fundamental identity, however, is not expressed in terms of wisdom. Job is not described as wise, and his struggle is not introduced as a struggle of wisdom. The prologue (chaps. 1-2) and epilogue (42:7-17) conspicuously omit references to wisdom, presenting integrity as the central issue. In the poetic section, Job wrestles with God's refusal to explain the suffering of the righteous as understood in Job's own religious tradition. As a spokesman for wisdom, Job expresses the indignation of those who express consistent devotion to God, but experiences difficulty equal to or greater than the difficulty the wicked or brutish encounter. The question itself, "Is God unjust?" exhibits no special appeal to wisdom; but Job's explorations, indeed, even his need for an answer, fall within the parameter of wisdom (Berry 1995:12)



ultimate issues, though in Job's case no "answer" is given. The message of Job includes a more direct involvement of God in the struggle for understanding.

Wisdom normally concentrates on the human response to God, rather than on God's personal intervention and activity in a specific situation.<sup>6</sup> For Job, wisdom arises not so much through human device or natural revelation, but rather through an act of God or special revelation (Berry 1995:12). Wisdom involves not only the human struggle for religious discernment, but also the intervention of God, providing answers and silencing complaints.<sup>7</sup>

To enter the sphere of the book of Job, is to challenge a person to one of humanity's oldest, most puzzling questions, namely the case of a blameless person overwhelmed by unthinkable tragedy. Through simple description, artistic poetry and great epilogue, Job fascinates readers as not many other books seem capable of doing. On reading Job, one's attention is drawn by the juxtaposition throughout its course of four important religious categories or themes: power (especially the power of God), order, moral justice and redemption (Habel 1983:144).

Gilkey, as quoted from Gilpin & Perdue (1992:160), observes that in Job one is struck at once by two interesting points. Firstly, it is the "moral justice" of God, not God's relation to the order of things that is radically questioned. Secondly, throughout the poem the power of God, the creative power that brings all that is into existence, is regarded as the grounds or basis of the order evident in nature, the "bounds" or "limits" that keep natural forces from chaos (38:10-12, 20), and the forms, often the bizarre forms, that each kind of thing represents (33ff).

Brown (1996:50) argues that wisdom in the book of Job is revealed as both radical and profound. Nevertheless, the book of Job is also profound in that it is not satisfied with simply dismantling conventional models of wisdom and morality. Job offers a new framework of moral discourse, one that begins with posing unspeakable questions and ends with a new worldview that revises as well as broadens the

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<sup>6</sup> However, elsewhere in Job, God's revelation of himself (chaps. 38-42) brings Job to the point of understanding.

<sup>7</sup> The degree of emphasis on this facet of wisdom is unique to Job, but concern for God's sovereignty and the notice of his wisdom in the created order appear in all the wisdom literature.

horizons of the traditional model of character. To borrow from the language of science and intellectual history, the book of Job marks a “paradigm shift” in the formation of character.

Wisdom in begins, in effect, where wisdom in Proverbs ends. The silent son of the book of Proverbs has secured his life within the community as head of a successful and secure household (Prov 31:10-31). Job's story begins with a character profile of such a successful patriarch. At the outset of the book of Job, four key traits are identified: Job is “blameless, upright” and one who “fears God” and “avoids evil” (Job 1:1). Each trait is integrally related to the other, together forming a comprehensive description of Job's character. Yet it is the first term, “blameless”, that comes to the fore in the narrative. It may be considered the cardinal or overarching virtue, denoting ethical completeness or integrity (Brown 1996:51).

When one regards these virtues as a whole, Job's character is profiled as unassailable. Job's wealth and status as the greatest of all the people in the east (1:3) gives material demonstration of his character. Job is a “family man” whose honour as head of the household has to be preserved and whose sacrificial actions on behalf of his children are motivated by fearful concern for his children's well-being (1:5).

We can argue that Job is a success story in the “business” of wisdom, even though he is never described as a “professional” sage. Like the figure of the silent son turned patriarch in Proverbs, Job has successfully appropriated the wisdom of his elders. He has embodied the character of the listening heart and it has literally paid off for him (Habel 1983:144).

From Job chapter 3 onward, the reader encounters a different Job from the one profiled in the prologue. Job's inner life is starkly revealed. Job is no longer an ordinary character who strictly accepts what God has allotted him. Job is filled with ambiguity and complexity as he begins to detail and assess his life. The prose and poetic characterisations of Job are encased by Job's claim that he is able to maintain his hold on integrity throughout his passionate outbursts (27:6). Job the silent has become Job the verbose, full of bitter complaints. The words he utters in chapter 3 are by a very different Job from the one introduced in the prologue (Brown 1996:60).



In the dialogues that follow his lament, Job is among peers in a debate first and foremost over his character and by extension over the moral coherence of the world in which they all live. Job's friends are missing the sarcasm and the attempt to teach him. Praise of traditional wisdom is most pronounced in Bildad's speeches. His appeal to the unbroken chain of inherited tradition presents the classic testimony to the veracity of sagacious tradition:

### Job 8:8-10

<sup>8</sup> כִּי־שָׁאֲל־נָא לְדֹר רִישׁוֹן וְכוֹנֵן לַחֲקֶר אֲבוֹתָם:  
<sup>9</sup> כִּי־תִמּוֹל אֲנִיחֵנוּ וְלֹא נָדַע כִּי צֵל יָמֵינוּ עַל־אָרֶץ:  
<sup>10</sup> הֲלֹא־הֵם יִזְרֹק יֹאמְרוּ לָךְ וּמִלְבָּם יוֹצְאוּ מִלִּים:

<sup>8</sup> *"For inquire, I pray you, of bygone ages,  
 and consider what the fathers have found;  
<sup>9</sup> for we are but of yesterday, and know nothing,  
 for our days on earth are a shadow.  
<sup>10</sup> Will they not teach you, and tell you,  
 and utter words out of their understanding?  
 (Revised Standard Version)*

It is evident that Bildad urges Job to listen to the univocal voice of the ancient past, the very ethos and vehicle of traditional wisdom. As the father figure in Proverbs imparts the wisdom of his own father (Prov. 4), the past generations are given a single voice that requires attention from the inquiring heart. Intermixed with such appeals to tradition is the language of character. Eliphaz's initial appeal to Job's character in Job 4:6 illustrates the inextricable connection between wisdom and character (Brown 1996:64).

The dialogic exchanges between Job and his friends, however, degenerate from this point onward. Within the dynamics of the debate, the connection between wisdom and character forces Job into the unenviable position of having to defend his integrity in order to convince his friends of the veracity of his new-found wisdom. The close

affinity of wisdom and character accounts for how the friends' discussion frequently reverts to verbal discharges of accusation against Job (Habel 1983:145).

Job's friends find his defence a matter of pretension and condescension. Bildad regards such condescension particularly offensive:

### Job 18:3

<sup>3</sup> מִדֹּעַ נִחְשַׁבְנוּ כַּבְהֶמָה נִטְמִינוּ בְּעֵינֶיכֶם:

*"Why are we counted as cattle (by you)? Why are we stupid in your sight?"*

In addition, Eliphaz sarcastically asks Job:

### Job 15:7-8

<sup>7</sup> הֲרִאִשׁוֹן אָדָם תּוֹלַד וְלִפְנֵי גְבֻעוֹת חוֹלְלָה:

<sup>8</sup> הַבְּסוּר אֱלֹהִים תִּשְׁמַע וְתִגְרַע אֵלַיִךְ חֻכְמָה:

*"Are you the firstborn of the human race? Were you brought forth before the hills? ...Do you limit wisdom to yourself?"*

The insinuation is that Job has pretentiously identified himself with the ageless voice of wisdom herself (Proverbs 8:22-27).

The tone of the dialogue is not one of mutual collegiality. The wise reader, who may well expect a constructive, civil dialogue among the Joban sages, will find only a parody of sagacious discourse in the book of Job. Job's friends graciously try to force Job back into the role of the silent son, the unquestioning recipient of wisdom. Job needs to be re-educated and the first step is for him to acknowledge his inferior status before his consoling elders. Eliphaz suggests in some sense that Job needs to regress to the family of his childhood in order to cherish the values of traditional wisdom (Berry 1995:153).



Job, however, refuses to assume such a position. Job questions the very foundation of wisdom:

**Job 12:12**

בִּישִׁישִׁים חֲכָמָה וְאַרְךָ יָמִים תְּבוּנָה: <sup>12</sup>

*"Is wisdom with the aged,/ and understanding in length of days?"*

The traditional principle that age and wisdom intersect is thus overturned. Conversely, long life and prosperity, the by-products of wisdom, are available to the wicked as well as to the wise:

**Job 21:7**

מִדּוּעַ רָשָׁעִים יַחֲיוּ עַתְקוֹ גַּם־גְּבָרֵי חַיִּל: <sup>7</sup>

*"Why do the wicked live on, reach old age, and grow mighty in power?"*

The qualitative and quantitative distinctions so firmly established in proverbial wisdom between the wise and foolish, the righteous and the wicked, may either reverse, as in Job's case, or even merge, which is a more frightening prospect (Brown 1996:66).

From Job's perspective, his friends have painfully failed in their responsibility to comfort him in his pain. He accuses them of treachery (6:15), of withholding kindness, of forsaking the fear of God and of abandoning him in his moment of dire need (6:17-18). Such accusations are prevalent in the language of betrayal. Indeed, Job makes the generalisation that such behaviour is akin to pure, unadulterated greed:

**Job 6:27**

אַף־עַל־יְתוֹם תִּפְּלוּ וְתִכְרוּ עַל־רֵיעֵכֶם: <sup>27</sup>

*"You would even cast lots over the orphan and bargain over your friend."*

The anomaly that Job presents to his friends requires a fundamental change in the cultural framework in which traditional wisdom has its home. That wisdom is inextricably linked to Job's character, is confirmed by the simple observation that Job constantly accuses his friends by means of defamation of character, while his friends are only trying to be consoling and instructive. To his friends, Job embodies anti-wisdom by rejecting the wisdom's traditional ethos and relying instead on the veracity of his personal experience of suffering (Berry 1995:154).

A related view concerning the association of wisdom with Job and his friends comes from the self-contained passage in Job 28, the poem on wisdom. The poem begins with a statement concerning the existence of a silver mine and proceeds to describe the methodical yet daring enterprise of mineral extraction. The poem then redirects its focus in v.12 by posing the question regarding the location of wisdom (Habel 1983:144).

In the prologue, the reader views Job from an external vantage point. Job's actions and responses outline the external contours of his character. The epilogue adds a new virtue to Job's developing character, compassion for the other. Job prays on behalf of his opponents, setting the process of restoration in motion (42:8-10). We can therefore argue that the book of Job displays the character of a wisdom tale. "Unlike other wisdom books, Job contains no breaks in synchronicity from beginning to end. The recorders of both the prose and the drama maintained consistency by presenting the issues with no breaks from the storyline" (Berry 1995:155).

Brown (1996:115) argues that wisdom in Job can be viewed as a character in transition. The poet highlights the initial stage in Job's "formation" by setting in tension the Job of the prologue with the poetic Job. For some forty chapters the poet renders in turgid discourse what is essentially unspeakable in the prologue. What binds the two vastly different characterisations of Job together is Job's wisdom and integrity.

Wisdom as part of worldview is presented as a dynamic component of character that may fluctuate between complete adherence to moral norms and unorthodox honesty and tenacity. Brown views the poet's purpose to reshape the contours of Job's



integrity. “Character as depicted in the prologue typifies the root values of traditional wisdom; self-restraint in speech an emotion, a near stoic acceptance of one's fate, an all-consuming concern with personal honour within the family and community, and submissive reverence of God” (Brown 1996:115).

As Job's discourse recontextualises wisdom, so it also refashions reverence of God. The “fear of God” in proverbial wisdom profiles a relationship of openness and receptivity to divine authority. However, Job initially reconstructs the traditional notion of the “fear of God” as divinely inspired terror in light of his situation. According to Job's friends, godly fear should inspire timidly, surrender and repentance.

In the end: Job has spoken what is right (42:7). Job's development is now complete. He has attained a devotional trust in God that is equal to the trust he places in himself. Job's character and his integrity is marked above all by self-honesty and courage to counter the impersonal march of traditional wisdom that would suppress the threatening truth behind his experience.

The divine discourse in chapters 38-41 adds another dimension to his reformulation of fear before God. Whereas Job changes the issue of fear as a matter of antagonistic trust, Yahweh's discourse, to which Job in the end gives assent, recaptures the inspiring dimension of respect. The litany of the cosmos was not meant to terrify Job into submission, but to broaden Job's moral worldview, to bring about a “spiritual change”.

The above mentioned characteristic applies to the bulk of biblical wisdom. It is evident from the book of Job that he challenges the then current wisdom understandings, resulting in a new manner of understanding. Human experience in Job takes priority over theological defences of God's justice. Biblical wisdom developed such a view subsequent to the emphasis on proverbial instruction.

The resolution of the book, namely the theophany, adds very little to the revelation of wisdom. Instead, it constitutes the age-old theme of creation as the caption of God's wisdom (Berry 1995:155).

Like the son-turned-family man at the conclusion of Proverbs, Job, the patriarch-turned-citizen of the cosmos, returns to his domicile and community with renewed vision and wisdom.

### **3.7 Wisdom and worldview in Proverbs**

The book of Proverbs contains some carefully worded tutoring, which functions to set the several collections into a common framework. Proverbs 1:2-7 uses many different words to characterise those who master the proverbs: wisdom, instruction, understanding, intelligence, righteousness, justice, equity, discretion, knowledge, prudence, learning and skill. Those who truly listen observe multiple voices competing for their attention, each of which rewards close hearing.

The book of Proverbs refers to four kinds of sapiential teaching that students should understand: proverbs, parables, sayings and riddles. The first of these, the proverb, refers to a basic similarity, in which a given occurrence is set beside another, so as to illuminate the former in some significant fashion. The second word, the parable, seems to point towards those sayings that carry a “sting” hidden within their clever formulation, and may by extension refer to warnings and advice. The statement, “wise sayings”, seems to function as a general category and consequently serves to identify certain collections within the present book of Proverbs. The final word, riddles, indicates mysterious sayings and maybe even extensive reflections on the intention or meaning of life (Crenshaw 1998:24).

In Proverbs a teacher reflects on the continuity of the wisdom tradition and the teachers’s role in that important undertaking (Proverbs 4:1-5). Wisdom as worldview almost constitutes a legacy transmitted from parents to children. Appealing to his son to listen, the teacher recalls his own education at the feet of his father, and repeats the promise of a long life and an admonition against deafness. One is able to identify some emotion in that a direct quotation functions to teach the value that should be placed on fatherly education.



## Proverbs 4:4-5

<sup>4</sup> וַיְהִינִי וַיֹּאמֶר לִי יְהוָה לִבִּי שְׁמַר מִצְוֹתַי וְ  
חַיָּה:

אֶהְבֶּה וְתִצְרֹךְ: <sup>5</sup> קְנֵה חִכְמָה קְנֵה בִינָה אַל־תִּשְׁכַּח וְאַל־תֵּט מֵאֲמַר־יָפִי

*[4] he taught me, and said to me,*

*"Let your heart hold fast my words;*

*keep my commandments, and live;*

*[5] do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth.*

*Get wisdom; get insight.*

(Revised Standard Version)

The reference to a mother in verse 3 indicates that the words “father” and “son” function in their natural sense here. While scholars generally presume that “father” and “son” come to function metaphorically in canonical Proverbs, meaning “teacher” and “student”, nothing prevents a literal understanding of these terms. The advice to obtain wisdom at great cost (Proverbs 4:7) does not always suggest tuition, and may thus refer to a school setting (Crenshaw 1998:24).

A casual reading of the Book of Proverbs reveals the general understanding of wisdom as worldview in Proverbs. A thorough analysis of the Proverbs reveals that these short sayings follow many patterns and constructions that have some bearing on the meanings (Scott 1965:58).

Proverbs are in essence didactic, following the pattern of a formal instruction using imperatives or prohibitions (16:3; 23:9), are expressed in didactic sayings that look at traits and acts that are to be followed or avoided (14:31), tell an example story (7:6-23), make a wisdom speech (8:1-36), or develop numerical sayings (6:16-19). The instructions, whether commands or admonitions, use motivations or reasons for complying (Zuck 1995:42).

The most common form of motivation is a subordinate clause stating the purpose, result, or reason for the instruction:

**Prov 19:20**

שִׁמְעַ עֵצָה וְקִבֵּל מוֹסֵר לְמַעַן תִּחְכַּם בְּאַחֲרִיתָיִךְ: <sup>20</sup>

*"Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise."*

The motivation is sometimes implied in a general observation:

**Prov 3:11-12**

מוֹסֵר יְהוָה בְּנֵי אֶל־תִּמְאָס וְאֶל־תִּקְץ׃ <sup>11</sup>

כִּי אֶת אֲשֶׁר יֶאֱהָב יְהוָה יוֹכִיחַ וְכָאֵב אֶת־בֶּן יִרְצֶה: <sup>12</sup>

*"My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline / and do not resent his rebuke, / because the Lord disciplines those he loves, / as a father the son he delights in."*

There are general proverbs that draw lessons by reflecting on worldview in relation to right values and right conduct. Scott (1971:59-63) lists seven ways in which this is done. Proverbs may present:

- (1) things that appear distinct but are similar (14:4a),
- (2) things that seems the same but are different (27:7b),
- (3) things that are similar (using similes as in 25:25),
- (4) things that are absurd or futile (17:16),
- (5) sayings that classify types of people (14:15),
- (6) sayings that indicate relative values (27:3), and
- (7) sayings that set forth consequences (27:18).

When wisdom calls to the uninitiated, she directs her appeals toward fools. The summons emphasises the consequences of rejecting wisdom. The foolish audience makes hers a futile appeal for converts. Her lack of success indicates she intends, in spite of appearances, to appeal to the inexperienced devotee of wisdom rather than the fool. Wisdom warns of the regret the fool will experience when he needs help and receives no response. Wisdom describes herself as the source of truth, righteousness, understanding, knowledge, prudence, discretion, humility, good advice, wealth, honour and justice (Berry 1995:132).



Many readers see Proverbs as the guideline for determining whether other forms and themes throughout the Bible conform to the category, “wisdom”. It is perhaps the lack of a clear original context for its statements that makes it an attractive point of reference. Proper understanding of the term “fear of God” indicates how the editors of Proverbs viewed wisdom as religious literature. The special perspective on wisdom entailed in Proverbs’ approach at first glance seems directive or legalistic. Though the proverbs are directive by intent, the tone of the teachings encourages reflection rather than blind obedience (Bullock 1995:15).

A number of proverbs do indeed contain simple moral commands: Do not be a witness against your neighbour without cause, and do not deceive with your lips. Do not say, ‘I will do to others as they have done to me; I will pay them back for what they have done’ (24:28-29).

The book of Proverbs is a collection that does not emanate from one community but from many. This is significant for our understanding of wisdom. McKinlay (1996:44) believes that dating and social location for the first nine chapters, as for the book as a whole, pose problems. Many scholars have made proposals with regard to its intent and purpose, but have built upon considerable assumptions. McKinlay believes that there is very little consensus and there are many possibilities for conjecture.

The didactic nature of wisdom, points to the purpose of the book. The introduction of the book (1:2-6) sets forth the purpose: to initiate the reader into wisdom and instruction. “The book then claims to be a primer of right conduct and essential attitudes toward life, aimed at producing lives in conformity to the divine will. The immediate object was to train and educate for the preservation of the family unit and social stability” (Zuck 1995:24). Whereas Job, as Ecclesiastes, are reflective wisdom, Proverbs and the Song of Songs are didactic. That is, they seek to teach rather to argue or convince (Zuck 1995:25).

Wisdom in Proverbs displays a disposition toward finesse in poetic technique. The blending of style and composition proposes that this collection derive from a different setting than the one that produced the other larger collections. The different types of

wisdom in Proverbs, helps to develop our understanding of worldview which point to a dialogue with *ubuntu*.

### **3.7.1 Family wisdom**

This type of wisdom is also called folk proverbs. Its objective is toward accomplishing this valuable aspiration. Contemplating individuals combined their talents in order to comprehend nature and human relationships. Sound and experiential wisdom was a basic formula of life in all its proportions. It entailed close study of human conduct in every imaginable circumstance, from which certain basic principles for thriving performance were formulated (Crenshaw 1998:77).

The main teacher of such wisdom was the father. It is possible that the mother assisted him in this task. Emphasis on the formation of character belongs to this intimate circle, specifically strong admonitions to hard work, self-denial and control of the tongue (Brown 1996:35).

### **3.7.2 Court wisdom**

Although the great majority of canonical proverbs seem to have arisen among the proletariat in small villages, a few of them may derive from the royal court. Court wisdom has a restricted audience; it was restricted to an exclusive group of potential rulers and advisers to persons in power. The adjective 'secular' characterises this kind of wisdom. The fundamental mechanism of communicating court wisdom was didactic (Crenshaw 1998:78).

The teachers seem much more conscious of pedagogical technique; thus they attach motive clauses and reasons to sayings. In addition, they use rhetorical questions freely and often rely on exhortation and admonition (Brown 1996:40).

These teachers consider the predicament of the court: appropriate table manners, expressiveness, etiquette, modesty before elders and devotion. Court wisdom also teaches prospective court personnel about procedures to behave around kings and warns against presumption with reference to royal dispositions. This kind of wisdom



emphasises the ruler's capability for ensuring justice and recognises that his throne is founded on virtue.

### **3.7.3 Theological wisdom**

Theological wisdom differs in essence from family wisdom and court wisdom. The objective of theological wisdom is to provide education for everybody. The primary method of reaching this target is dialogue and warning. This is a direct appeal that is build upon a religious basis (Crenshaw 1998:78).

Another feature of theological wisdom is that of the personification of wisdom and folly. The remarkable development in theological reflection arose from frequent talk about limits imposed on human knowledge and ability, as well as from the recognition that men's and women's fates lay in their own hands. "In short, frail humans acknowledge a need for contact with the universal Lord, particularly as the idea of exact reward and retribution for good and evil gradually eroded. Personified wisdom achieved that purpose for these teachers" (Crenshaw 1998:80).<sup>8</sup>

### **3.7.4 Fear of the Lord**

Probably the most distinctive characteristic in theological wisdom is the idea concerning proper fear of the Lord. This idea changes over a period of time, so that its use differs greatly in Job and Ecclesiastes from that in Proverbs. By the fear of the Lord the sages called attention to religious devotion in the fullest significance of the phrase. It intends to teach every human being that he owes the creator. Without a vital relationship with God, no one could attain enough wisdom (Crenshaw 1998:78).

Originally, the phrase "fear of the Lord" seems to have amounted to religious devoutness in the face of divine mystery, but later the idea became much broader. Fear of the Lord also consists of the ancient covenantal obligations, and no real friction exists between wisdom and sacred history (Crenshaw 1998:78).

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<sup>8</sup> Von Rad, G 1975. Wisdom in Israel, 144-76; Camp C V, Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs and "Woman Wisdom as Root Metaphor: A Theological Consideration," in *The Listening Heart* (JSOT Sup 58; Sheffield: JSOT, 1985), 45-76.

### 3.7.5 Personification of wisdom and folly

Wisdom was the first of God's creative works; she was modelled long before the earth and sea was created and before the mountains and the hills settled into their place. "She stood beside the deity and watched while God constructed the heavens, girdled the ocean with the horizon, fixed the clouds, prescribed limits for the sea, and knit the earth foundation together. Playing before God, Wisdom was a daily delight, a little child bringing great pleasure" (Crenshaw 1998:80).

Brown (1996:42) is of the opinion that this moral values outlined in the personification of wisdom and folly, constitute the pinnacle of moral and social development, the goal of the proverbial *paideia*. The instinctive public provenance easily agrees to wisdom's own arena of activity at the centres of public discourse and practise. Instruction and wisdom delineate two interrelated domains or perhaps even stages of moral development, namely the home and the larger community, respectively. Disciplinary instruction is what characterizes parental discourse; the discourse of wisdom moves beyond rebuke to revelation and invitation (chs 8 and 9).

When we examine McKane's assessment (1970:265) that "the educational process was more occupied with developing mature intellectual attitudes than with morality", we have to conclude that he totally misses the point.<sup>9</sup> One cannot dichotomise intellectual and moral values and believe that the ancient sages thought like that. Brown (1996:43) is of the opinion that the condensed list of righteous virtues listed in 1:3b contain a multitude of mechanisms and intellectual virtues. This is not meant to divert one's attention from those virtues that address the life of the community. "...like spokes joined in the centre, the surrounding virtues support the central concern of community maintenance. Cognitive and instrumental virtues are enlisted to enable the moral agent to size up ethically demanding situations accurately and to act appropriately within the community" (Brown 1996:42).

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<sup>9</sup> McKane hardly explains the presence of the moral virtues of justice, honorableness and uprightness in v.3.



In short, the comprehensive collection of virtues in Proverbs 1:2-7 extends an invitation that is both broad enough to compel the reader to partake of the complex and compelling world of wisdom and yet focused enough to present in a new way the hard lessons of threat and tragedy experienced by the community.

This leads us to the conclusion that an understanding of the cultural worldview of a poem is very important in order to understand the poem. The reader needs to know something about the worldview, fiction and poetry of the time and, as far as possible, about the author and the times in which the author lived. Research in Old Testament wisdom theology is severely hampered by inadequate information on wisdom in Proverbs:

- Only a limited number of poems are available to us;
- There are no theoretical discussions dealing specifically with poetry;
- The authors are always anonymous.

The figure of Wisdom is still a mystery to scholars. There have been numerous studies of Wisdom and still we have no clear conception of her identity and origin. It seems relatively easy to define her role in Proverbs 1 and Proverbs 9. In Proverbs 1 Wisdom is a teacher standing on the square in front of the city gate assembling students around her. In Proverbs 9 she is a goddess who keeps herself distant. Instead of emerging in public, she sends out her ladies-in-waiting to invite young people to a festive celebration. It is significantly more difficult to determine the role of Wisdom in Proverbs 8 (Bullock 1995:19).

In the first few lines of the poem she appears as a teacher gathering students around her (vs. 1-11). Then, she speaks like a proud goddess who puts kings and nobleman into office (vs. 12-21) and tells of her origins before the world was made and of her childlike play at the dawn of creation (vs. 22-31). Her role as an infant-goddess is not the final one. In the end the poem returns to its original theme, showing Wisdom in the role of an educator (vs. 32-36).

There are a number of contradictory views in the study of wisdom as worldview in Proverbs:

- (a) According to some scholars, wisdom is derived from a pagan goddess of wisdom (Albright 1946:283).
- (b) Other scholars are of the opinion that wisdom is much closer to God (Donner 1958:10).
- (c) Others conceive wisdom as anything but a goddess, and rather as the result of creative imagination. Wisdom is seen as the product of the somehow spiritual cosmic order. Scholars with this view is of the opinion that any mythological declarations or godly characteristics are strong poetic tools that are intelligently used by someone who does not believe in the existence of gods other than Yahweh (Gemser 1963:23, 49; Plöger 1984:98,111; Von Rad 1975:205).

It may be argued by viewing these assumptions, that in writing his texts, the poet did not distance himself from pagan mythology. He could have assumed that there were many gods and goddesses besides Yahweh, and that Wisdom was only one of them. For the author Wisdom could have been a legitimate goddess as any other deity that was worshipped by the contemporaries of the author.

### **3.8 Wisdom and worldview in Qohelet**

A different understanding of worldview presents itself in the book of Ecclesiastes with an abrupt observation about the meaning behind the teacher's work (12:9-12). In this case, the remarks derive from someone other than the writer of the sayings to Qohelet. The description of the speaker's action seeks to make his conclusions somewhat more agreeable to the larger community (Holm-Nielsen 1974: 168-77; Sheppard 1977: 182-89). In the opinion of the person expressing a view on Qohelet's work, the sayings "retain their sting" even when clothed attractively.

The book of Qohelet contains a number of fairly long didactic poems and short sentences which, expressed predominantly in the first person, purport to be a wise man's personal experience of life. Ecclesiastes is the Greco-Latin form of the Hebrew Qohelet. Both "names" relate to a congregation, but the exact meaning escapes us.



“Preacher” is another interpretation of the word, going back through Luther (*Prediger*) to Jerome (*concionator*). However, as Von Rad (1975:49) explains, Qohelet does not preach, and his book has no sermons. He is described as “David's son” (1:1; 1:12), probably referring to Solomon, the accepted “author” of so many wisdom books. But this attribution has no support in the text except briefly in Chapter 2. More concrete information is provided, probably by one of his disciples, in the epilogue (12:9-10): Besides being wise, Qohelet taught the people knowledge, and weighed, scrutinised and arranged many proverbs. Qohelet sought to find pleasing sayings, and to write down true sayings with precision (Von Rad 1975:49).

Qohelet profiles a character of whose approach to wisdom and obedience is unique within the larger framework of wisdom literature. Brown (1996:120) argues that unlike Proverbs and Job, Qohelet lacks any definably prescriptive view of the community in its role in the formation of character. Consequently, Qoheleth - the speaker throughout most of Ecclesiastes<sup>10</sup> - models a different type of character, one that deconstructs the centre of traditional wisdom from within rather than from the outside, as in the case of Job.

Some scholars are of the opinion that Qohelet is one of the most puzzling books of the Bible. Its apparently unorthodox statements and extreme pessimism caused its inclusion in the canon of Scripture to be questioned (Beckwith 1985:297-394). The problem of retribution as one of the essential principles of the wisdom tradition is also prominent in Qohelet (Spangenberg 1996:504).

Qohelet was clearly written as a dissuasion guide for people prepared to think out their response to God's unseen hand in life and history. Although it contains practical advice, it would appeal to a different public than Proverbs. One may rather link it to Job (Wright 1983:231).

Wisdom in Qohelet set out the rules of life for an individual who wishes to be a member of a society and who looks for the right way to build up a god fearing conscience. Qohelet was a sage who pondered on life's antinomies and had

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<sup>10</sup> The exception is the epilogue in 12:9-14, which is the product of the final editor.

his own experience, but also on the common experience of men and history. Qohelet represents the sage and his wisdom, both taken on a human level and his purpose to lay down his “philosophy”, first of all for himself, perhaps in order to reconcile himself with life and the world he has to live in, and then for others as well, in order to show them how to organise and direct their own life, especially when it becomes hard and contradictory, or full of delusions and frustrations (Castellino 1968:24).

Qohelet praises wisdom, spells out its benefits and calls it as superior to folly as light is to darkness. Yet he also teaches that human wisdom is strictly limited and cannot achieve its goals, that it may fail to provide the promised benefits, is vulnerable to folly, and in the face of death is as helpless as folly. Qohelet’s ideas on wisdom seem to be pulling in all directions. To find some coherence amongst these ideas, one should examine the way he views the validity of wisdom - in other words, about his epistemology - and secondly, about the way he views the power and value of wisdom (Fox 1989:79).

While Proverbs offer the results of experience in simple and straightforward admonitions, sayings and proverbs, Qohelet goes to the root of matters, questions opinions and situations in order to discover the source of so many grief’s and so much distress. His blunt presentations of the facts and accidents of life, the problems to which they give rise, the vivid description of the haphazardness of everyday life, contribute to making the book so intriguing, so human.

Castellino (1968:27-28) places great emphasis on certain values, as a general understanding of the worldview in Qohelet:

- Whatever humankind usually calls the ‘goods’ of life: health, riches, possessions, material and sensual pleasures, honours, ambition, career, prestige, etc. are of their nature incapable of giving a person full satisfaction to his/her craving for happiness (2:1-11, 17-19; 5:9-14).
- Further, these values are not stable; people cannot rely on them, because they may easily be lost; the greater had been the efforts of human beings to obtain



them and the greater enjoyment while they lasted (2:20-21; 5:12-16; 6:2-6, 12-16).

- Another essential point of Qohelet's doctrine concerns humankind's activity in general and in its results. Experience shows that the pursuit of happiness at all cost does not bring with it necessarily either the goods or the happiness people was seeking in them. Human beings experiences that they are not the master of events. The world, on the contrary, goes on its own way, carries on by its own laws, slipping of someone's hands, so to speak, without allowing itself to be shaped or ruled by another person. God alone is the full master of it and rules it at his own will, distributing what he pleases and to whom he pleases, independently of the desires of human beings(2:22-26; 3:13; 4:7-8; 8:16-17; 9:1-2, 11-12).
- People find themselves powerless against such an order of things. Job tried it in the discussion with his friends, but failed and was obliged (and taught) to acquiesce in God's will, recalling at the same time his wisdom and justice (3:9-11, 15, 22; 6:10-12; 8:8-16)
- Such an impossibility for humans to penetrate the intentions will and plans of the gods was common throughout the ancient East.
- Therefore: (a) set aside all anxious striving and labour; (b) avoid all speculation on God's ruling of the world and (c) be thankful to God for whatever satisfaction he gives one, valuing and measuring everything as a gift from him and enjoying it, never forgetting that one shall have to render strict account to God himself.

These are some characteristics wisdom may teach human beings. Human experience contributes the negative element that could drive people to agnosticism and scepticism. Wisdom as worldview contribute the background and framework of God's presence and justice that help man to accept the facts, transferring them onto a higher plane where a solution is believed to exist, although not clearly perceived by man (Castellino 1968: 28).

The only advice offered is to find enjoyment in life and in the fruit of one's toil while one can (2:24; 3:12-13; 3:22; 5:17-19; 7:14; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:7-12:8), to venture forth boldly in spite of the uncertain (9:10; 11:1,4,6), to fear God (5:6; 11:9), not to work feverishly (4:4-6), not to put all one's eggs in one basket (11:2), and not to waste words trying to puzzle things out (1:18; 4:17-5:6; 6:10-11; 10:12-15). The "be not too just, be not too wicked" advice in 7:16, frequently seen as a major thought of Qohelet, is not Qoheleth's message at all, but is something he judges not helpful. Similarly, the various collections of proverbs are not Qoheleth's favourites offered by way of advice as previously treated, but they are either cited to be criticised or they are arranged and juxtaposed to produce various negative effects (Sheppard 1977: 191).

Unique to the Hebrew scriptures, wisdom in Ecclesiastes is essentially a self-presentation. Only near the end of Ecclesiastes does the second person address occur in a way that formally echoes the patriarch's address to his son in Prov. 1-9.<sup>11</sup> The majority of the book consists of a person who, like Job, shares his personal discoveries and bares his soul, but without partners in dialogue. Qohelet celebrates in a confession of failure as he recounts his pursuit to understand the world and himself through wisdom (Brown 1996:121).

Qoheleth's self-declared status as king gives him royal recourse and the means to search out everything. As king, Qoheleth does not need to only rely upon past tradition, the corpus of conventional wisdom. Rather, he is in the somewhat unique position to test and confirm the truth of traditional wisdom and, if need be, modify it.

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<sup>11</sup> A telling contrast is the flat, parental figure featured in Prov. 1-9 and Qoheleth. On one occasion, the father recounts his life as a boy, but never at any point does he adopt a confessional tone (Prov. 4:3-9).



Thus Qohelet sets out on an ambitious series of experiments designed to do just that: test the effectiveness of wisdom (Brown 1996:121).

On the contrary Von Rad (1975:55) is of the opinion that wisdom has entered a crisis situation in the book of Qohelet. Qohelet is a "wise man" (12:9) but he freely admits that he never attained the wisdom he sought (7:23-24). He rejects many of the claims of the sages (8:17). But the points he scores (vanity, failure of justice to be rewarded, etc.) are precisely the things that consumes the sages. Qohelet reasons as a sage does, attempting to find out what is "good" for one to do (2:3; 6:10 etc.).

In his experiment with pleasure, he states twice that wisdom is the means he employed (2: 3, 9). His methodology is that of the Israelite sage. It is significant that he never considers folly a viable option. Although Qohelet incorporates a variety of forms of wisdom, the tenor of his confessions does much to undermine in part or at least set in tension many tenets of traditional wisdom. Thus, the ways in which Qohelet characterises wisdom require primary attention on his reflection or testimonial statements (Brown 1996:126).

It should also be noted that Qohelet's treatment of wisdom as worldview is very diverse. Wisdom is characterised as vulnerable (9:11), inaccessible (7:23b-24) as both a method and a goal (2:3, 9; 7:23a, 25; 8:17) and perhaps even as an unstable woman.

Qohelet's charges at the very outset in his admitting that the pursuit of wisdom is an "unhappy business" that has no payoff. With such low sanction, Qohelet balances the quest for wisdom to a failed business venture. In so doing, Qohelet gives wisdom a distinctive materialistic sentiment. Such a construct is not exceptional in traditional wisdom, since material prosperity had long been considered a natural result of the successful appropriation of wisdom. Still, Qohelet's narrow focus merges the material by-products of wisdom.

Clements (1991:34) is of the opinion that Qohelet marks a significant milestone in two ways in the progress of wisdom. "... In the first place there are clear signs that, although the author was accustomed to delivering his teaching orally, he has

developed characteristically literary structures and woven short epigrammatic sayings into more extended compositions... Secondly it appears that Qohelet was concerned to set out a sufficiently comprehensive attitude to life that it could properly be regarded as a form of personal philosophy."

In the theology and worldview of Qohelet there is a distinct awareness that the formation of personal character is a primary goal of wisdom. It seems the emphasis has shifted towards "being wise", rather than "knowing wisdom".

In Ecclesiastes 7:15-18, Qohelet discusses the problem of the value and balance of righteousness and wisdom. He has concluded that human wisdom cannot really explain all of life, nor the future (6:10-7:14), and that even the principle that righteousness brings prosperity has many exceptions (7:14-15). Thus he notes in 7:15 that some righteous people die in spite of their righteousness, and some wicked people live long lives in spite of their wickedness.

For Qohelet, joy is God's imperative for man, not in any anemic or spiritualized sense, but rather as a full-blooded and tangible experience, expressing itself in the play of the body and the activity of the mind, the contemplation of nature and the pleasures of love. Since Qohelet insists that the pursuit of happiness with which humans has been endowed by Jahweh as an inescapable sacred duty, it follows that it must be an undeniable right (Beckwith 1985:395).

Qohelet's search leads him to see that life is full of contradictions. He believes "that there is nothing better for human beings than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; also that it is God's gift to men that every one should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil" (3:12-13). Qoheleth cannot resolve the contradictions that he finds in life, for, like him, a person can be gifted by God with wealth, possessions, and honor, lacking nothing, but "God does not give him power to enjoy them" (6:2).

Since order is of prime importance in the Israelite concept of creation and in their worldview, all aspects of life, God's actions as well as humans', must fit into this order, which provides a certain logical framework for how one lives and views the



world (Loader 2001:83). The insistence on order, moreover, dictates how God and God's justice are viewed. Related to order and flowing from it is the theory of retribution.

Both Qoheleth and Job challenged the Israelite worldview or aspects of it, particularly the theory of retribution. Therefore, the possibility for transformation appears inherent in understanding wisdom as worldview.

The basic premise of Qohelet is that life is meaningless. Human being's struggle to achieve a name, reputation, fame, fortune, pleasures, and even to acquire wisdom, is meaningless, ultimately counting for nothing. Nature is cyclic, season follows season and pattern follows pattern. There is no meaning to the cycle. Man can do nothing to change it; man can only conform to it. To make his point, Qohelet was in a position to explore in depth the various ways by which man sought to give meaning to his life. The search for wisdom produced frustration (1:16 ff.), indulgence in pleasures and the acquisition of possessions were hollow. Qohelet learned, as Job had before him, that a person is powerless before the cosmic order. There are predetermined times for everything and to these man can but yield.

In the face of Qoheleth's experience and analysis of the futility of human ambitions we can ask: How should man live? Qohelet affirmed that wisdom was better than folly (2:13), friendship better than loneliness (4:9 ff.), keeping vows to God wiser than violating them (5:1 ff.), accepting one's lot and enjoying life to be preferred to constantly striving to better it (5:11 ff.). His response to the problem of theodicy is that one must enjoy pleasurable things when they are available, and when evil days come, accept these too (7:14). His advice was to press out of each moment of life as much enjoyment as possible (8:15-9:17), particularly in youth (11:9-12:1), because old age limits one's possibilities (12:1-8).

Qohelet has been called pessimistic, but his message comes through marked with realistic enjoyment of life (11:7). There is no bitterness in his denial of the validity of what he deems to be fruitless theological speculation (8:16 ff.) nor over-concern for that which cannot be changed (7:13). Like the writers in Proverbs, he frowns on laziness (10:18) and in the next breath extols the joys of bread, wine and money. He

suggests a certain recklessness with possessions (11:1-2, 6) on the chance that good results will come of it. Like Job, he rejects the doctrine that the good are rewarded and the wicked punished and recognizes that sometimes it happens, sometimes it doesn't. Qohelet finds no ultimate meaning in life, only the meaning that each man gives to it in his commitment to full enjoyment of the brief span of years that are individually his.

Holmes defines worldview in terms of four needs, one of which is "the need to define the good life and find hope and meaning in life" (Holmes 1983:5). That this is the primary focus in the worldview of Ecclesiastes is quite evident from its theme and content. It presents two opposite life-views, two contrasting approaches to finding meaning in life. One is based solely on human devising and endeavors, limited to the finite confines of the dwelling-place of man, "under heaven" (1:13), "under the sun" (an expression which occurs twenty-nine times), while the other is rooted in the fear of God (3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12; 12:13) and the resultant relationship of submissive faith in the One who dwells in heaven (5:2), above the sun. Ecclesiastes places these two alternative views of life over against each other and recommends the "life of faith" (Jensen 1971:32), high-lighting the futility of an earthbound life-view and the joyous vitality of a relationship with God.

Jensen's outline is not without shortcomings, as are all attempts to outline wisdom in Ecclesiastes, but it comes closest to demonstrating structurally the relationship between the two contrasting worldviews, between the futility of the one and the joy of the other. Jensen proposes an outline of Ecclesiastes, which demonstrates the relationship between the two worldviews. He identifies four sermons, each of which expounds on two themes – futility (vanity) and hope. They first show the hopelessness of the earthbound ("under the sun") outlook, then the hope found in a relationship with God who dwells in heaven. This is followed by a conclusion, which consists of the fear of God and submissive obedience to Him (12:2-14) (Jensen 1971:16, 33, 47).

From this intricate interweaving of the two contrasting life-views the God-centered worldview of Ecclesiastes emerges. The centrality of God in this worldview is reflected in the fact that the word "God" occurs forty times, a more frequent usage than "vanity", which appears thirty-nine times. The Book affirms that only an outlook



that recognizes that God is present, good, and generous makes life coherent and fulfilling.

The worldview of Ecclesiastes stands in sharp contrast to that of secular humanism with its claim of human self-sufficiency and its tendency to absolutize human reason. In presenting this God-centered view of life, Ecclesiastes discloses the hopelessness and untenability of the secularist concept of life driving the reader not to self but to God, reminding us of the finitude of our wisdom (3:11; 8:17; 11:5) and the creatureliness of our existence (7:29; 12:1).

This dethronement of self-proud wisdom is also that which Qoheleth seeks to accomplish when he acknowledges wisdom, limited as it is, to be of great value, but, at the same time, through his reflection of the creative power of God, lays bare the fruitlessness - the "vanity"-of wisdom in regard to the ultimate questions.

Mankind is not only limited in wisdom, he is limited in life, both in terms of its activities and in its impermanence. One should joyfully engage in the activities of life because this is a God-given privilege and opportunity (2:24; 3:13; 5:18, 19; 8:15). Furthermore, they are not permanent because God can destroy them (5:6). On the other hand, man cannot even alter God's works (7:13), which endure forever (3:14).

The worldview found in Qoheleth is central to the integration of faith and learning. It provides a comprehensive framework, which gives meaning to all the disciplines and all of liberal education (Holmes 1983:10). It has special value for learning, which is integrated with faith because it contributes to the overall framework in which such learning takes place. This worldview supplies the coherence, in the sense that disparate and even conflicting elements cohere as they fit into a larger framework of thought and practice. The person views all of life, including education, from the perspective of his or her worldview.

The Book of Ecclesiastes plays a vital role in this venture of understanding wisdom as worldview, as it is a unique Biblical tool for leading students to adopt and retain an *ubuntu* worldview. A number of factors make it ideally suited for this purpose:

- There is timelessness about its message that makes it strikingly relevant to the issues facing contemporary humanity.
- It presents a God-centered worldview, which should serve as a paradigm for Africa today.
- Its theological principles, as it relates to the quest for knowledge, encompass and guide enquiry in both the "secular" and the religious domains.
- Its philosophical format is conducive to dialogue and confrontation with the everyday issues of life from a Biblical perspective, which is intellectually stimulating and appealing.
- It affirms in practical, philosophical, and theological terms that only God-centered worldview meets the needs of humanity in the quest for meaning and fulfillment.
- With regard to the theological approach, one may use Ecclesiastes to demonstrate, based on its theme and content, the superiority of the *ubuntu* worldview over that of secular humanism. One way of doing this is to draw attention to the striking similarity between the Book's pronouncement of meaninglessness ("vanity") upon all human effort without God and the tragic cry of modern existentialists.

The Book of Ecclesiastes makes a significant contribution to the attainment of this objective. Not only does it recommend a God-centered worldview but it affirms some specific values which derive from and are part of such a worldview. These include reverence for God (5:1, 2, 7; 8:12); submissive obedience to God (12:13); trust in God (8:12); moderation in eating (10:17); moderation in life as a whole (7:16); a good reputation (7:1); justice and equity (5:8, 9; 7:7); discretion (10:20); responsibility (11:9; 12:14); peace and harmony (4:6); commitment and dependability (5:4); sincerity (5:5); generosity (11:1, 2); industry (4:5; 10:18); meekness (10:4); teachableness (4:13; 7:5); contentment (5:10); wisdom (7:19; 9:15-18); sexual purity (7:26; 9:9); self-control (7:9).

The God-centered worldview presented in the Book of Ecclesiastes is a paradigm for worldview in Old Testament wisdom. Ecclesiastes answers effectively the basic questions of life regarding the nature of humanity, the nature of the human



environment, the problem that prevents our finding meaning in life and the solution to the problem. It reveals the emptiness of secular humanism and recommends a God-centered worldview as the sounder philosophy of life.

### **3.9 A Preliminary Conclusion: Wisdom's worldview – establishing a dialogue with African *ubuntu***

In this preliminary conclusion, wisdom is to be described as a faith experience. The shaping of Israel's worldview and of the activity of God behind and in it, arose in an ambience of faith and was characterised by trust and reliance upon God. Wisdom literature provides a Biblical model for understanding divine revelation apart from the historical mode (salvation history) in which it is usually cast.

If we look at Old Testament wisdom it is clear that Qohelet was familiar with the wisdom tradition and spoke in its language. The author works with opposites such as righteous and wicked, good and bad, wisdom and folly, and uses wisdom forms such as the "better" saying. Wisdom methodology is evident as well. Qohelet quotes traditional claims, observes the world and human experience, and reflects on those claims on the basis of observation and evaluation.

Yet Ecclesiastes differs from traditional wisdom, as exemplified in Proverbs, in important ways. Traditional wisdom seeks evidence that supports its claims and tends toward harmonizing diverse observations. Qohelet takes a more confrontive approach, placing claims and observations over against each other, looking for the exception rather than the general rule. If Proverbs provides guidance for coping with typical or ideal experience, Ecclesiastes explores the atypical and even disastrous.

The uncertainties that Proverbs recognizes are the diverse circumstances of life, the contingencies that call for a change of course. Yet there are certain stable values, such as diligence opposed to laziness, honesty opposed to deceit, righteousness opposed to wickedness. The "reward" for all this is the good life. Although Job's "friends" adhered to such a view, retribution is not to be understood in a mechanical way - as though a good act necessarily led to a good result, or an evil deed, to an evil consequence. Such "poetic justice" was desirable, but reality did not square with the

mystery of divine justice. Experience showed that the poor were oppressed, even though they deserved better. Hence the “better” sayings that defy an easy optimism, and extol righteousness even in the teeth of adversity: “Better the poor, walking in integrity ...” (Prov 28:6; cf. 19:1; 15:16).

Brown argues that all three main characters in the wisdom books end with a full profile of character formed or reformed. “The authors of three books would undoubtedly have much to say to each other in rebuke as well as in approval if they were seated together at table... All would recognize that the kind of interaction that leads to character formation is a rocky road, one full of crises and gifts” (Brown 1996:155).

Our immediate concern is that the insistence upon the moral governance of the world as an inherent part of work of divine providence was of fundamental importance to wisdom. Through the concept of blessing, righteousness and life the religious vocabulary of piety and worship intersects and overlaps with wisdom's ideas of a natural order which pervades the world and society.

If one had to design a cover for each of the three canonical wisdom books, drawn from their own contents and worldview, one may represent them by the various houses they describe. For Proverbs it could appropriately be the seven-pillared house of Wisdom, or better still that gracious, well stocked home of the accomplished wife, whose virtues bring the book to its serene close. For Job, a very different picture: perhaps the wreckage in which his family perished when ‘a great wind came across the wilderness, and struck the Four Corners of the house’; or perhaps even the ash heap to which he banished himself. As for Ecclesiastes, its insistence on the transience of earthly glory could hardly find a better symbol than its own description of a great house (12:3-4) in the grip of slow, inexorable decay (Kidner 1985:116).

Between them, the three books clearly cover three aspects of existence which no-one can afford to overlook: the demands of practical good management; the enigma of calamities that are beyond control or explanation; and the tantalising hollowness and brevity of human life. The three books explicitly labelled “wisdom” provide the backdrop for a consideration of wisdom themes occurring throughout the Hebrew



canon. Themes, forms and vocabulary common to these books qualify as markers of wisdom materials.

The book of Proverbs is of considerable interest because of the study of the books of Ecclesiastes and Job. Both of these books appear to react against some of the ideas of the Book of Proverbs, though one cannot be sure whether their authors were directly aware of the existence of the book of Proverbs as it now stands. Whybray's study of the vocabulary of the wisdom tradition, which he calls intellectual tradition, emphasises the close relationship between Proverbs and the books which appear to criticise Proverbs' basic assumptions (Whybray 1974:135).

The question of the extent to which the Israelite-Jewish wisdom tradition displays a distinctive religious character, has been answered by a number of scholars. There is, however, not much unity amongst the opinions of these different scholars. Some argued that this tradition of wisdom was so essentially secular and anthropocentric in its character, that it cannot properly be described as reflecting a truly religious nature (Clements 1991:151).

Probably many would share the view of Von Rad (1975:10) that for a long period critical approaches to the subject of Old Testament theology underrated the contribution made by wisdom. That wisdom played a notable role could easily be agreed to, although what this role actually was has been interpreted in various fashions.

One cannot overlook that wisdom itself did not remain "a static, an unchanged phenomenon" in the period during which the Old Testament was taking shape (Clements 1991:152). Different models have been adopted by scholars to describe the way in which the development of wisdom occurred. "The path towards the integration of wisdom into the Israelite-Jewish worldview was then one of assimilation to more distinctively Israelite ideas of divine revelation and of a divine control of the order of human life which imposed major modifications upon the older wisdom assumptions" (Clements 1991: 153).

One should be cautious not to treat the sapiential understanding of life as something foreign to the rest of Israel and merely the private property of the sages. “If the sages did not share an understanding with their audience, they would never have been understood. Hence we are dealing with an aspect of the Israelite worldview, as this was manifested in a particular portion of the literature (Murphy 1996:113).”

Very early on in his scholarly work, Zimmerli noticed the creational and universalistic stances of Israel's sapiential tradition (1964:146-58). Inspired by Zimmerli's observation of the importance of creation in wisdom theology, Leo Perdue goes so far as to speak of creation's centrality in wisdom. “I would go a step further by suggesting that creation is truly at the 'centre' of wisdom theology, meaning that creation integrates all other dimensions of God-talk as well as anthropology, community, ethics, epistemology (both reason and revelation), and society” (Perdue 1994:35).

Wisdom acknowledges a dynamic relationship between humans and their environment. Von Rad wrote that “the most characteristic feature of Israel's understanding of reality lay, in the first instance, in the fact that she believed man to stand in a quite specific, highly dynamic, existential relationship with his environment (1975:301).” In a sense, this is a “worldly” understanding, an appreciation of the autonomy, the independence, of created things. The autonomy of creation is recognized for what it can teach humans about themselves, about God's creation, and even about God's own self (Murphy 1996:113).

I believe that instruction in wisdom is nurtured into a distinct community that knows itself to be at odds with dominant assumptions. The sapiential perspective, as expressed in the worldview of Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, not only knows but practices a critical unmasking of its own claims to knowledge. To understand wisdom's worldview is to practice critical unmasking.

It is not the case, as is often suggested, that Job and Ecclesiastes reflect the disintegration of the sapiential tradition. Rather, those literatures reflect the ongoing practice and construction of that very tradition. Proverbs by itself is inclined to know too much and to believe too much in a naive way. Job and Ecclesiastes practice the



other pole of sapiential reflection, in which the settled consensus is exposed as being at variance with the facts of experience. Job and Ecclesiastes are conversations about the reality of experience in the face of formulae which have grown cold and hard. The potential for scepticism, unmasking, and criticism is exceedingly important for the understanding of worldview and for well-being of a community

Wisdom's worldview can be described in terms of four needs, one of which is the need to define the good life and find hope and meaning in life (Holmes 1983:5). That this is the primary focus in the worldview of wisdom is quite evident from its theme and content. Wisdom presents two opposite life-views, two contrasting approaches to finding meaning in life. One is based solely on human devising and endeavors, limited to the finite confines of the dwelling-place of man, "under heaven", "under the sun", while the other is rooted in the fear of God (3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12; 12:13) and the resultant relationship of submissive faith in the One who dwells in heaven (5:2), above the sun.

Wisdom places these two alternative views of life over against each other and recommends the life of faith (Jensen 1971:32), highlighting the futility of an earthbound life-view and the joyous vitality of a relationship with God.

The worldview of wisdom stands in sharp contrast to that of secular humanism with its claim of human self-sufficiency and its tendency to absolutize human reason. This dethronement of self-proud perception is also that which wisdom seeks to accomplish. Humankind is not only limited in wisdom, humans are limited in life, both in terms of its activities and in its impermanence. One should joyfully engage in the activities of life because this is a God-given privilege and opportunity.

The worldview found in Old Testament wisdom literature is central to the integration of faith and learning. It provides a comprehensive framework, which gives meaning to all the disciplines and all of liberal education (Holmes 1983:10). It has special value for learning, which is integrated with faith because it contributes to the overall framework in which such learning takes place.

There is timelessness about the message of wisdom that makes it strikingly relevant to the issues facing contemporary humanity. It presents a God-centered worldview, which should serve as a paradigm for Africa today. Its theological principles, as it relates to the quest for knowledge, encompass and guide enquiry in both the "secular" and the religious domains.

Its philosophical format is conducive to dialogue and confrontation with the everyday issues of life from a Biblical perspective, which is intellectually stimulating and appealing. It affirms in practical, philosophical, and theological terms that only God-centered worldview meets the needs of humanity in the quest for meaning and fulfillment.

With regard to the theological approach, one may use wisdom to demonstrate, based on its theme and content, the superiority of the *ubuntu* worldview over that of secular humanism.

Old Testament wisdom makes a significant contribution to the attainment of this objective. Not only does it recommend a God-centered worldview but it affirms some specific *ubuntu* values which derive from and are part of such a worldview. These include reverence for God; submissive obedience to God; trust in God; moderation in eating; moderation in life as a whole; a good reputation; justice and equity; discretion; responsibility; peace and harmony; commitment and dependability; sincerity; generosity; industry; meekness; teachableness; contentment; sexual purity; self control.

Old Testament wisdom and African *ubuntu* contains observations and interpretations of human life and behaviour, along with advice on how to live. They are characterized by a tendency to contrast positive and negative persons and qualities, using a distinctive vocabulary (e.g., wise/fool; diligent/lazy; righteous/ wicked; intelligent/simple).

Wisdom and *ubuntu* are also characterized by distinctive forms, such as saying, instruction, parable and alphabetic acrostic. The wisdom tradition is frequently



described as having two branches, variously described as practical and speculative, secular and theological, or optimistic and sceptical.

The goal of wisdom and *ubuntu* is to pass on what one has learned, both from instruction and from observation and experience; it is thus an educational enterprise. Wisdom and *ubuntu* contains observations and interpretations of human life and behaviour along with advice on proper behaviour. It combines overall concerns with God, the created world, and discovering what is good in human existence with practical advice about enjoying life and avoiding unnecessary trouble, especially from superiors.

## **CHAPTER 4: Close reading of Proverbs 1, 8 & 9**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter dealt with the wisdom as worldview to understand the instruction it presents regarding the right way of living. In Old Testament wisdom literature, this way becomes known through the recognition of God's design embedded in creation and through living harmoniously with that design. In this chapter no attempt will be made to provide a new commentary on the text of Proverbs 1-9. When one considers instruction and discipline to which the way of wisdom leads, our texts in this chapter will take us further into the realm of the community, the responsibility towards the community and family paradigm.

As was suggested in the first chapter of this dissertation, Proverbs 1-9 displays a distinctively theologised version of the authentic development of the wisdom tradition. Proverbs 1, 8 & 9 provide the reader with a good understanding of the younger wisdom literature and can be used as a focal point to understand the different features of Proverbs 1-9. Rather than doing a close reading of all nine chapters, these three chapters are chosen. Proverbs 1 & 9 provide us with an excellent introduction and form an outline for understanding Proverbs 1-9. Proverbs 8 are also chosen as it can be understood as giving substance to Wisdom's claims. Proverbs 8 identifies the wisdom that is inherent in the father's instruction in chapters 2-7. It should be noted that Proverbs 8 highlights the important themes and images of wisdom presented in Proverbs 1-9. Proverbs 8 as a whole builds with ever-increasing claims by wisdom, claims which culminate in the sayings surrounding the creation and ultimately in the claim to be life itself.

The call of Wisdom in Proverbs 8 comes in the form of three imperatives: discern, hear-obey and take. Wisdom takes up her cry in terms very similar to those found in 1:22ff addressing the listeners. Proverbs 8 indicates that hearer is naive about the danger involved in following Folly.



The first seven verses of the book of Proverbs introduce the purpose of the book, namely that it concerns virtues. It is clearly stated that the book is written primarily for young people. "Whereas the bulk of Proverbs consist of thick jungles of terse, self-contained proverbs, somewhat haphazardly arranged (chapters 10-29), these first nine chapters contain relatively lengthy, organised sections of sustained thought or 'instructions' imparted from a parent to a youth. In their final form, Proverbs 1-9, along with chapter 31, provide a unifying focus for the book as a whole, focus established by the voices of various characters and the values they impart" (Brown 1996:23).

A great deal of attention has been devoted to exploring the literary outline the two parental figures, wisdom and the alien or other woman. Brown argues that "little has been done in discerning the various ways these characters employ and nuance ethical language. This is surprising, since the seven verses that open the book of Proverbs present an unusually dense collage of ethical terms or, more accurately, virtues. Clearly, the specific nomen-culture of wisdom discourse is equally worthy a topic of literary craft and development" (Brown 1996:23).

#### **4.2 The parental legacy in Proverbs 1- 9**

After a short introduction (1:1-7), Proverbs 1-9 present a series of teachings addressed to "my son" by a mother or father (1:8-9). This advice is designed to guide young men as they step into the adult world, with its problems and possibilities. These instructions form a literary "testament" to the oral teachings and as Van Leeuwen (1999:31) argues: "it introduce the readers to the book's worldview, to its fundamental framework of meaning. Chapters 1-9 provide a moral map of the world, a portrait of the 'universe' as made by God with wisdom."

One of the outstanding characteristics of the book of Proverbs is the number of female figures in the book and the important role that some of them play. Lucas (2003:107) argues that the most developed presentation of personified wisdom is found in Proverbs 8. "In 8:1-20 Wisdom speaks in the kind of way that she does in 1:20-33. Although 8:22-31 picks up on the theme of wisdom and creation mentioned in 3:19-20, it goes beyond anything found in other passages in which wisdom is personified."

Proverbs provide an almost random collection of brief didactic speeches, poems, memorised and religious sayings. Most of the text is straightforward and skilful in presentation. The message is easy to understand and for this purpose the book became a favourite for many Christians and Jews all over the world (Lang 1986:3).

Thus, according to Bullock (1995:21), in Proverbs the underlying basis of life and human experience is one's relationship to God. From that relationship grows moral understanding and the perception to judge what is right (2:6-22), a proper attitude toward material possessions (3:9-10) and industrious labour (6:6-11), the necessary equilibrium and sense of security for living in the world (3:21-26), and the right relationship toward one's neighbour (3:27-29), to mention only a few of the more practical benefits of that personal relationship.

Snell (1993: ix) describes the parental legacy in Proverbs 1-9 as a tantalising legacy with hints at its origins and original uses. "It makes reference to familiar historical personages as well as to unfamiliar. One would want that these references would allow us to date the book or at least to say something about its composition, but this has not in fact been the case" (Snell 1993: 1).

Proverbs 1-9 reiterates the necessity for instruction, provided by both father and mother (1:8; 6:20), and the urgency of the children's obedience. It is directed to young people (cf. 1:4) whose lives could still be shaped in the ways of wisdom.

The theme of the seductive woman occurs more frequently than any other common theme in Proverbs 1, 8 & 9. The passages portray the seductive woman as an unfaithful wife. She resembles a common prostitute in her appeals to the wisdom student. Illicit sexual conduct with its danger and consequences makes the immoral woman a logical choice for the image of Folly. Wisdom plays a much clearer role in this regard. In the depiction of wisdom, the sexual overtones emphasised with regard to folly receive less attention (Berry 1995:130-131).

Proverbs 1-9 does not contain secular or anti-religious elements that could be traced to an 'enlightened', worldly orientated class of civil servants and court officials. There



was no such thing as a nonreligious school literature, nor was there anything like a “sapiential world view” that was fundamentally different from the thinking of other social groups. In fact, as Lang argues, the school literature and the national-religious traditions of Israel do not play a part. “God’s activity is seen, not in the fate of the nation, but in the destiny of individuals and in the order of creation” (Lang 1986:12).

It is wrong to expect the book of Proverbs to provide a complete image of the author’s world and society. It is also wrong to regard it as the sole reading material of its consumers. Schmidt (1974:21) argues that it is not possible to discern a distinct view of religion or of history especially reserved for “wisdom”. It also applies to the idea of a divine world order that humans can understand and whose anger they flee whenever they fail to submit to its logic.

The concept of world order may not be set apart as specifically and exclusively sapiential idea either. In Proverbs 1-9 we have a clear statement of the accepted and commonly shared worldview and not, as some scholars believed, an exception to the rule of biblical thought. Wherever we look in the Bible we find what Schmidt (1974:21) calls “in manifold variation, yet with total clarity, that the dominant background of Old Testament thought and faith is characterized by the idea of a comprehensive order of the world and by the belief in creation in the broadest sense of the term, a belief which, in many aspects, Israel shares with her neighbours.”

We can therefore argue that Proverbs 1-9 link wisdom with creation and this is expanded upon in 8:22-36. In Proverbs 8:22-30 the world is illustrated as a well-ordered arrangement designed and executed by Yahweh. Wisdom appears to establish the principles of order (Lucas 2003:111).

In Proverbs 8:31 wisdom emerges as the mediator between Yahweh and humans. Lucas (2003:111) argues that 8:32-36 is a call to listen to Wisdom because “whoever finds me finds life and obtains favour from the Lord.” Proverbs 1-9 provide the basis for understanding the enterprise of the sages in ancient Israel. By careful observation of the patterns that may be discerned in life, seen through the lens of “the fear of the Lord”, and reflection on experience in the light of knowledge of the holy One, “it is possible to gain insight into divine wisdom” (Lucas 2003:112).

The faith of the wisdom teachers in Proverbs 1-9 is thus expressed in a theology of creation. Drawing on a rich variety of creation myths and their root metaphors, the sages depicted God as the creator of heaven and earth, who used wisdom to create and then to continue to sustain the world. "Creation was not once-for-all locked in the primordial past, but rather a continuous action" (Perdue 1994:78).

Van Leeuwen (1999:258) argues that the literary context of Proverbs 1-9 "introduce us to the world within the book and its parts find their meaning. Basic images of women, ways, and houses make explicit the worldview that the final author saw as the essential meaning context for chapters 10-31."

Whybray (1968:45) first identified these originally independent poems and his analysis has been widely accepted by scholars. Most of them are not in their original form, but have been augmented for various reasons, theological and non-theological. The clearest indication of their identity as a distinct literary type is that they all begin in a similar way: 1:8-9; 2:1,9; 3:1-4; 3:21-22; 4:1-2; 4:10-12; 4:20-22; 5:1-2; 6:20-22; 7:1-3. These introductory verses have the following common characteristics:

1. They are all addressed to "my son" (sons in 4:1) as the first or second word.
2. They all command the pupil to "hear", "receive", "not forget", and so on, the instruction which follows (a conditional form is used in 2:1).
3. They all assert the personal authority of the speaker: the "father" or teacher.
4. They all assert or imply the great value and utility of the father's words.
5. There is no reference to any authority beyond that of the father himself ("God and man" in 3:4 is merely a set phrase indicating universality).
6. The word "wisdom", which occurs only twice (5:1; 4:11), here means ordinary human wisdom and is not treated - in contrast to its use elsewhere in these chapters - as a word of special significance.

The items at which the instructions concluded are more difficult to determine than are their beginnings. In several instances a verse or a short group of verses (1:19; 2:21-22; 3:53; 4:18-19; 5:21-23), which refers in general terms to the respective fates of the wicked and/or the righteous, appears to mark a conclusion, but this is not necessarily



the conclusion of the original instruction: expansions of earlier material in biblical books, where they occur, often tend to be placed in final positions (Whybray 1994:12).

### **4.3 Close reading of wisdom in Proverbs 1, 8 & 9**

As explained in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, a close reading will be used to scrutinise the particular words, images and organisation of the scenes or passages in Proverbs 1-9. A more detailed and in depth reading of chapters 1, 8 and 9 will be provided. Proverbs 1, 8 and 9 were chosen as the emphasis is on wisdom as means of education and these chapters will give us a good indication of the cultural worldview, which may help us in establishing a dialogue with the African concept of *ubuntu* in the next chapter. In addition we need to set a limit to this study, which could be accomplished by focusing on these significant chapters.

Close reading is a technique used to fragment dense or complex ideas and language or to draw attention to individual parts in order to make their meaning clearer. In addition to answering the question, “what does this passage mean?”, an explication seeks to answer the question “how does this passage mean?” Further questions arise, such as: “How does the passage unfold? What phrases, images, patterns, problems intrigue the reader? What drives the text? How do the words, images and ideas contribute to the meaning?” (Clines 1983:34).

During close reading one does not need to refer to every line in the passage, but one should address its main features and use quotations from the text to demonstrate and explore the interpretation. The book of Proverbs claims to be a compendium of the wise sayings of several different individuals. Close reading will enable us to move from these wise sayings to larger issues and will provide a good understanding of wisdom in these chapters.

Chapters 1, 8 & 9 illustrate the techniques of wisdom at the height of the movement in Israel. The teacher addresses the pupil as his son and maintains a paternalistic tone throughout. Oral instructions dominate, as the frequent references to hearing and

memorising indicate; writing is hardly mentioned. The teacher would repeat the lessons for the student to memorise and quote verbatim.

The writer's purpose here is to draw the strongest conceivable contrast between the results of seeking and finding wisdom as those pursuing a life of folly. Although by no means devoid of specific instructions, these chapters serve largely to clarify the issues involved in the choice of wisdom or folly, righteousness or wickedness and to prepare for the several hundred specific proverbs which follow (Lasor *et al* 1982: 549). The unit of Proverbs 1-9 expresses the intent to provide reference material for those seeking an understanding of wisdom in general or of specific sayings.

#### **4.4 Structure and composition of Proverbs 1**

There is some debate about whether 1:1 is the title of the whole book or merely the title of the first section (chs. 1-9). The first view has in its favour that the Hebrew Bible took the verse as the title of the book. Kidner (1985:22) argues that according to this view the references to Solomon in 1:1 are an indication that he was the primary author of the proverbs in the book.

The second view is that 1:1 simply introduces the first major section of the book. The support for this view is that some succeeding sections commence with a similar caption (Prov 10: 1; 24:23; 25:1; 30:1; 31:1) (Kidner 1985:24). In common with other ancient Near Eastern wisdom books, Proverbs begin with a title, followed by a brief statement of its purpose (1:1-7). This introduction culminates in a theological declaration that serves as the essential point of orientation for the entire book (Van Leeuwen 1999:258).

Although we can thus argue that Proverbs 1:1-7 functions as an introduction to the book of Proverbs, there are three distinct parts of this introduction. Verse 1 serves as the title for the book. Verses 2-6 provide a purpose statement. Verse 7 then gives the motto or theme of Proverbs.

Verses 2-6 set forth the purpose of the book and the benefits that will come from heeding the instructions contained within it. These verses are almost like the opening



address that a teacher or principal might give to new students in the wisdom schools. Though the author of this first section of Proverbs is especially addressing young people he knows that his advice is also valid for people of any age. Verse 5 invites those who are learning and have already given them wisdom to continue the pursuit for great understanding.

Verse 3 restates the purpose of Proverbs in another way. It is to gain instruction (musar) in wise dealing.

Verses 4 and 5 note that there are no limits in the age range that can learn wisdom. The young and the simple need to learn. The word "simple" here refers to an inexperienced person rather than to a lack of mental capacity. We might paraphrase the concept as "uninitiated" or "unsophisticated." Verse 5 ends with another significant word that is translated "guidance" in the NIV and "wise counsel" in the KJV (NRSV: skill). The Hebrew word literally speaks of steering. The wisdom that the book of Proverbs teaches is like a steering wheel. When it is properly used it will guide a person through the curves of life, around the obstacles on the way, and finally to life's ultimate destination.

Verse 7 has been described as the motto, the theme, and the programmatic saying for the book of Proverbs. Eighteen times the "fear of the Lord" is mentioned in Proverbs. Proverbs 9:10 also states that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." This is the best known of the "fear of the Lord" proverbs and it is often given as the central theological concept of the Wisdom Literature. However, each "fear of the Lord" saying is slightly different or arises in a slightly different context.

The very choice of the English word "fear" to translate the Hebrew expression shows the difficulties translators face. Words may have different meanings in different contexts (denotations), but they also have emotional baggage (connotations). At the level of meaning (denotation) the word "fear" in seventeenth century England included a meaning that fit the Hebrew word here (Van Leeuwen 1999:259). It spoke of a proper attitude toward those other people, for example a reverence and submission in the presence of royalty. However, now "fear" has the connotation of being frightened, which is not what the proverb is about.

The fear of the Lord speaks of a reverent and loving obedience to the Lord and his will. It speaks of a proper humility in the presence of the Lord. It does not mean groveling or acting reverent on the outside when one's inside is defiant. It is the recognition that the Lord is God, that he made us and we are part of creation; we are not God's equal. It is also important to note that these phrases consistently refer to the fear of the Lord, not the fear of God.

### Prov 1:1-7

<sup>1</sup> מִשְׁלֵי שְׁלֹמֹה בֶן־דָּוִד מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל:  
<sup>2</sup> לְדַעַת חֲכָמָה וּמוֹסָר לְהַבִּין אֲמָרֵי בִינָה:  
<sup>3</sup> לְקַחַת מוֹסָר הַשֶּׁכֶל צְדָק וּמִשְׁפָּט וּמִיִּשְׁרִים:  
<sup>4</sup> לְתַת לַפְתָּאִים עֲרֻמָּה לְנֶעַר דָּעַת וּמִזְמָה:  
<sup>5</sup> יִשְׁמַע חָכָם וַיִּוֹסֵף לָקַח וְנָבוֹן תַּחְבִּלוֹת יִקְנֶה:  
<sup>6</sup> לְהַבִּין מִשְׁלַי וּמַלְּיָצָה דְּבָרֵי חֲכָמִים וְחִידוֹתָם:  
<sup>7</sup> יִרְאֵת יְהוָה רֵאשִׁית דָּעַת חֲכָמָה וּמוֹסָר אֲוִלִּים בָּזוּ:

[1] *The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel:*

[2] *That men may know wisdom and instruction,  
 understand words of insight,*

[3] *receive instruction in wise dealing,  
 righteousness, justice, and equity;*

[4] *that prudence may be given to the simple,  
 knowledge and discretion to the youth --*

[5] *the wise man also may hear and increase in learning,  
 and the man of understanding acquire skill,*

[6] *to understand a proverb and a figure,  
 the words of the wise and their riddles.*

[7] *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;*



*fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

(Revised Standard Version)

Brown (1996:24) argues that this passage is thick with sapiential terms, whose density is matched only by its extensive scope. With regard to Proverbs 1:1-7 von Rad (1975:13) argues: “By the cumulations of many terms the text seems to aim at something larger, something more comprehensive which could not be expressed satisfactorily by means of any one of the terms used.”

Von Rad may be correct in noting that the excess of terms cannot be precisely defined. There is certainly a range of meanings conveyed in the introduction, extending from specific ability or intelligence to more conceptual qualities, such as righteousness and virtue. The prologue advertises the book as efficient in teaching children the basic intellectual and ethical virtues and also enhancing the knowledge and interpretive skills of more advanced scholars (Fox 2000:53).

The concept of מוֹסֵר essentially implies “correction”, whether verbal or physical. It sometimes means “pre-emptive” rectification and may also mean “caution” and “warning.” Sometimes it is extended to the point of synonymy with “wisdom” or “teaching.” Fox argues that in all these cases the composition of מוֹסֵר is an ethical teaching (2000:59).

מוֹסֵר focuses on the method by which wisdom is attained. It carries the meanings of training, correction, and self-control. The sages knew that experience was a valuable teacher, but many people failed to learn the lessons of experience. Unless experience is combined with the counsel of those who are older and wiser a person may misinterpret experience.

מוֹסֵר is training in the collective experience of many generations. However it also reflects the goal of wisdom teaching, which is disciplined living. Many have observed that the person who would master life must first learn to master him/herself. The importance of this discipline in living can be seen by the fact that the word appears again in verse 3.

Verse 3 identifies the practical aims of the collection. This may comprise the central purpose of Proverbs from the limited perspective of chapters 1-9 – to convey to the reader “how” to live wisely (Berry 1995:129). Verse 4 shows the rather specific audience intended: The work targets those who are young in terms of age, experience, or lack of submission to the principles of wisdom. Stated more positively, the work would lead its reader or student toward maturity. However, verse 5 broadens the focus of the work to include those already wise who can benefit from a sharpening of their wisdom skills. Verse 6 presents the most basic aim of all: Study of this work leads to a more sophisticated understanding of wisdom sayings and their proponents. This indicates the intent of a reference work. By continued exposure, the reader would increase proficiency toward the unattainable goal of perfect wisdom.

The words “my child” and related addresses occur frequently in 1-9. This identifies the chapters as intended for instructional purposes in the narrow sense of parenthesis. At the very least, the addresses encourage reflection focused on moral behaviour. This does not mean that the chapters served as textbook in a formal educational system. If proverbs 1-9 did not support an educational institution, it displays no less formal demands on its students.

This ancient "course objective", is to think in sapiential terms, whose density is matched by its comprehensive scope. Brown argues that this litany of values and virtues opens and concludes with reference to the intellectual values of wisdom and instruction (vv 2 and 7) as well as to their literary conventions: “words of insight” (v 2) and their forms (v 6). “Effective instruction, skill, prudence and discretion (vv 3a and 5b) constitute eminently practical or instrumental virtues that enable the person to pursue successfully certain goals or objectives” (Brown 1996:29).

At the centre of this constellation of virtues we find the comprehensive moral traits of “righteousness, justice, and equity”, which constitute normative communal relations and conduct (v. 3b). “All in all, the particular arrangement of ethical terms embedded in these introductory six verses exhibits a tightly wrought concentric structure” (Brown 1996:29).



- A Comprehensive, intellectual values: 2a
- B Literary expression of wisdom: 2b
- C Instrumental virtue: 3a
- D Moral, communal virtues: 3b
- C' Instrumental virtues: 4-5
- B' Literary expressions of wisdom: 6
- A' Comprehensive, intellectual virtues: 7

On the whole chapter 1 do not consist of short, independent proverbs like those which make up most of the book, but of longer, structured poems of a quite clearly literary character. The material is thus varied in form and content and cannot be the work of a single writer. Despite all these differences, Proverbs 1 is marked by a common purpose: an educational one. Whybray (1994:11) argues that it is pedagogical material, designed to be used in the preparation of boys or young men to face the problems and dangers of the adult world so that they may become wise and responsible members of it. Fox (2000:76) argues that Proverbs 1 focus on the fact that one should seek wisdom and this means “to assimilate the values of the teachings and to be wise.” The educational purpose is most clearly evident in instructions voiced by a parent and addressed to his son.

In addition to Proverbs 1 there is also a further, shorter poem praising wisdom in the third person (3:13-20). In addition to the ten instructions there is also some teaching material (6:1-19; 9:7-12). The nine chapters are framed – as previously mentioned – by a preface or prologue (1:1-7) and an appendix (chapter 9) which dramatically presents two contrasting sections depicting two female figures, Wisdom and Folly, between whom the young pupil has to choose: the one offering life and the other offering enjoyment which would in reality lead to death (Whybray 1994:12).

Prov 1:1-6 is structured as a series of infinitives of purpose dependent on the title, with a pair of jussives in verse 5 dividing the series into two groups. The concluding principle is an independent sentence (Fox 2000:72).

The Hebrew word translated "proverb" (מִשְׁלֵל) essentially means a comparison. However, through usage it came to mean any profound pronouncement including maxims, observations, sermons (e.g., ch. 5), even wisecracks (cf. Ezek. 18:2), and revelations from God (cf. Ps. 49:4). Etymologically the English word means "in place of (i.e. for) words." A proverb is usually a succinct statement that stands in place of a long explanation and expresses a truth about reality. Fundamental to the proverbial form is the fact that it bears a truth that has been tested by time" (Bullock 1995: 155-156).

Fox (2000:65) indicates that the prologue promises that the book will teach the readers how to understand the enigmas composed by the wise. According to the outstanding feature of an enigma is its immediate obscurity. Its meaning is strange and irrational and not always the author's direct intention (Crenshaw 1981:22). Enigmas require interpretation to make any sense of them and not just to enrich their meaning. Words and images should be read as tokens of entities and events in another domain. An enigma deliberately blocks immediate understanding by means of ambiguities and obscurities before allowing the audience to penetrate to a deeper understanding.

Fox (2000:66) argues that the author of the prologue is affirming the importance of enigmas in the book of Proverbs because wisdom "includes the prestigious realm of the esoteric, and he wants us to know that Proverbs, too, holds this sort of wisdom."

#### **4.4.1 The purpose of the book 1:2-6**

The first six verses of the first section form a one sentence editorial introduction to the entire book of Proverbs. The subsequent verses designate the purpose of the collected wisdom sayings and the merits of possessing wisdom.

Fox (2000:58) is of the opinion that the statement of purpose promotes the book as textbook in teaching the young and as help in advanced education. This statement of purpose continues in a series of infinitival clauses dependent on the title that describe the goals and functions of the proverbs.



Ross (1991:904) argues that the Book of Proverbs has two purposes: to give moral skilfulness and to give mental discernment. The first purpose is developed in vv. 3-4; then, after a parenthetical exhortation in v. 5, the second purpose is developed in v. 6.

The word “wisdom” here refers to the message of instructions and the teachings themselves. The key words in verses 2 through 4 have the following meanings:

Wisdom 2a: Skillfulness

Instruction 2a: Taught by discipline

Understanding 2b: Discernment

Righteousness 3b: Right behaviour

Justice 3b: Correct decisions

Equity 3b: Moral integrity

Prudence 4a: Sensibility in practical matters

Discretion 4b: Thoughtfulness

This passage promotes on two levels the book’s value to instruction. It would help the pupil ‘learn’, ‘understand’ and ‘absorb’ wisdom and it would reveal skilfulness and insight. Morality is the subject to be taught in absorbing the מוֹסֶר of insight: fairness, equity and integrity. The virtues the book relate to both the content of instruction and compensation. “To be sure, wisdom will also bring exterior rewards – life, health, wealth, favour and well-being – but these are not among the inducements offered in the Prologue” (Fox 2000:75).

Verse 5 interrupts the series of infinitives dependent on the title. According to Fox (2000:62) it is a logical continuation of the promises of the prologue. “Besides instructing the young in wisdom and ethics, the book will advance the education of those already learned.” Verse 5 is presupposed by verse 6, which lists activities suitable to advanced study and not to the teaching of the immature.

The prologue wants the reader to know that the book of Proverbs is the place where one is able to acquire skills of cunning and insight. The prologue’s promise that the book would teach wisdom, ethical virtues of righteousness, justice and integrity,

presupposes that these qualities are something the reader already knows to be appealing.

#### 4.4.2 The thesis of the book 1:7

The first verse of the next section (1:7), which is repeated in 9:10, stipulates that the basic premise of wisdom is reverence for Yahweh, which would include healthy respect for all expressions of Yahweh's will - moral, ethical and cultic. Here the writer sets forth a model of the ideal man. He is one who avoids evil company (1:10ff.), complacency (1:32), contention (3:28 ff.), the adulteress (5:1 ff.; 6:23 ff.; 7:6 ff.; 9:13 ff.), debt (6:1 ff.), laziness (6:6 ff.), arrogance (8:13). On the positive side, the ideal is a careful individual, secure in time of calamity (1:26 ff.; 3:25 f.) because he is upright in his ways (2:6 ff.; 4:10 ff., 25 f.), discreet (2:11), reliable (6:1 ff.) and diligent (6:6 ff.). The recognition of the material rewards that come from adhering to the way of wisdom suggests that the writer was a comfortable, wealthy, respected citizen, who was somewhat out of sympathy with the wayward youth of his day (1:33; 3:9 f., 25 f.; 8:18, 20).

This verse enjoys almost universal recognition as the key statement, not only in Proverbs, but in all the wisdom literature of the Bible (cf. 9:10; 15:33; Job 28:28; Ps. 111:10; Eccles. 12:13). Some scholars regard it as the motto of the book, others the foundational principle, others the major premise, or something similar. The verse contains a positive statement followed by its negative corollary.

יְהוָה יִרְאַת also occurs in Proverbs 9:10. Fox argues that although the word דָּעַת signifies the complete extent of knowledge in Proverbs, it is synonymous with חִכְמָה and relates to wisdom rather than all forms of knowledge. יְהוָה יִרְאַת is the first step to דָּעַת (1:7) and the origin of חִכְמָה (9:10). If one assimilates the teachings, חִכְמָה will enter one's heart and דָּעַת will be good to one's soul (Fox 2000:69).

Proverbs 1:7 is the climax to the Prologue. McKane (1970:264) argues that 1:7 substitutes piety for educational discipline: "The acquisition of knowledge and wisdom does not now (in the later wisdom) depend on a severe educational discipline



in which submission is made to the authority of a teacher and the pupil's attitudes formed by his assimilation of a body of traditional, empirically based wisdom. The context is now one of piety rather than education, and the source of authority is Yahweh." Through this explanation of McKane, wisdom is made to hinge on submission to Yahweh and acceptance of his authority. On the other hand Fox argues that McKane is drawing a false dichotomy between fear of God and education (2000:68).

Prov 1:7 says that the fear of God is the starting point of the educational process and not an alternative for it. "One must still actively pursue wisdom (2:1-4) in order to achieve it and to arrive at an understanding of the fear of God (2:5). Piety facilitates submission to educational discipline; it does not replace it" (Fox 2000:68). The fear of God is so valued because it motivates right behaviour even when socially enforced sanctions do not exist or cannot be effective.

"Beginning" does not mean that the fear of the Lord is where one starts learning wisdom, but then he or she can move away from it as from the starting line in a race. Rather the fear of the Lord is the controlling principle, the foundation, on which one should build a life of wisdom. "Knowledge" is a relationship that depends on revelation and is inseparable from character. Even though many unbelievers have acquired much information without the fear of God, true knowledge rests on a relationship to God that revelation supports. We can learn the really important lessons in life only this way. Other ancient Near Eastern countries produced wisdom literature in addition to what we have in our Old Testament (Crenshaw 1981:245).

However, the wisdom literature outside Israel did not contain advice to centre one's personal relationship around a god as being essential to obtaining wisdom. The references to fearing the Lord in Proverbs, including 1:7, are unique and make this book distinctive and theologically relevant. The demand for faith underlies the whole book. Only in a right relationship to the true and living God can one enter into God's foreordained, righteous order for life and find true success and happiness. The fool despises God's revealed order for life and the instruction that would lead him or her into it (v. 7b).

The Israelites / Jews believed people could acquire knowledge in three ways. One way was through observing nature and human behaviour. Another way was by drawing analogies between traditional beliefs (e.g., creeds) and reality. A third way was through an encounter with the transcendent God (Crenshaw 1981:247-252).

#### 4.4.3 The Parental Instructions – Prov 1:8 - 9

As is often the case, the Hebrew word translated “hear” in verse 8 also meant to obey. This corresponds well with the fact that the instruction to be heard is again מוֹסֵר. Training or discipline is not just something to be heard but a way of living to be followed. A part of the unique Hebrew way of thinking appears in verse 8. The first line, calling for obedient hearing of a father’s instruction, is paralleled in the second line by advice not to turn away from a mother’s teaching. Father and mother are placed in a parallel and equal responsibility for teaching.

Wisdom literature often taught by means of contrast. That method is used here in the first instruction. Verses 8-9 affirm the value of instruction and direction. Verses 10-19 describe the enticement of sinful companions. Based upon the foundation of parental instructions are nine chapters of speeches addressed to 'my son' by a mother or father (1:8-9).

<sup>8</sup> שְׁמַע בְּנִי מוֹסֵר אָבִיךָ וְאַל-תִּפְשַׁשׁ תּוֹרַת אִמֶּךָ:  
<sup>9</sup> כִּי לֵוִית חֵן הֵם לְרֹאשְׁךָ וְעֲנָקִים לְגִרְגְּתֶיךָ:

*[8] Hear, my son, your father's instruction,  
 and reject not your mother's teaching;  
 [9] for they are a fair garland for your head,  
 and pendants for your neck.  
 (Revised Standard Version)*

A verb for “hear” or “listen” begins each lecture in verses 8 and 9. “Listen” or “hear” may indicate both “understanding” and “obedience.” Fox (2000:79) argues that “in the introduction to the lectures, these terms designate the lesson about to be delivered.



In other words, the verse is not a general admonition to obey one's parents, but an injunction to hear the instruction and teaching in vv 10-19. Each lecture is an instruction and a teaching."

In genre and function, these speeches are similar to the Egyptian "Instructions", in which a father or a king left a testament of wisdom to his heir. In later Jewish tradition a similar genre is the "Jewish Ethical Will" (Abrahams 1997:36).

In the introduction to the teachings, the term מוֹסֵר as instruction or teaching indicate the lesson to be delivered. מוֹסֵר in this section is not a general warning to be obedient, but an instruction to hear the teaching that follows in vv 10-19. "Each lecture is an instruction and a teaching" (Fox 2000:79)'.<sup>10</sup>

As speeches, chapters 1 - 9 comprise of advice to a young man about to enter maturity. The teachings are clearly male in orientation. The parental speech in Proverbs 1:10-19 warns against ancient problems. Together these speeches, with their elaboration in chapters 2-9, form the crucial position for the wisdom collections to follow. Van Leeuwen (1999:259) is of the opinion that the fundamental perspective is that life is a conflict between wisdom and folly, good and evil. "Wisdom and Folly are powerfully attractive 'women' who issue contrary invitations to naïve young men, even employing the same language (9:1-6, 13-18). Like the love that pulls humans either to Augustine's City of God or toward the City of this World, so Proverbs 1-9 presents human as pulled by *eros* for Wisdom or Folly."

#### 4.4.4 Warning against consorting with sinners 1:10-19

<sup>10</sup> בְּנֵי אִם־יִפְתּוּד חַטָּאִים אֶל־תֵּבֵא:

חַיִּים וְתַמִּימִים כִּי־וֹרְדֵי בֹרֶ: <sup>11</sup> אִם־יֹאמְרוּ לָכֵה אֶתָּנוּ נֶאֱרָבָה לָדֶם נִצְפָּנָה לְנִקְי חָנָם  
נִבְלָעִם כְּשֹׂאֹל <sup>12</sup>

<sup>13</sup> כָּל־הוֹן יָקָר נִמְצָא נִמְלֵא בְּתֵינוּ שָׁלָל:

<sup>14</sup> גּוֹרֵלֶךְ תִּפְּיֵל בְּתוֹכָנוּ כִּי־ס אַחֵר יִהְיֶה לְכָלָנוּ:

<sup>15</sup> בְּנֵי אֶל־תֵּלֶךְ בְּדֶרֶךְ אֶתָּם מִנֶּע רִגְלֶךְ מִנְּתִיבָתָם:

<sup>16</sup> כִּי רָגְלֵיהֶם לָרַע יִרְוּצוּ וַיִּמָּהְרוּ לְשַׁפְּדֵדִים:

<sup>17</sup> כִּי־חָנָם מְזֻרָה הָרָשָׁת בְּעֵינַי כָּל־בַּעַל כֶּנֶף:

<sup>18</sup> וְהֵם לְדָמָם יֵאָרְבוּ יִצְפְּנוּ לְנַפְשָׁתָם:

<sup>19</sup> בֶּן אֲרָחוֹת כָּל־בָּצַע בָּצַע אֶת־נַפְשׁ בַּעְלֵיו יִקַּח: פ

[10] *My son, if sinners entice you,  
do not consent.*

[11] *If they say, "Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood,  
let us wantonly ambush the innocent;*

[12] *like Sheol let us swallow them alive  
and whole, like those who go down to the Pit;*

[13] *we shall find all precious goods,  
we shall fill our houses with spoil;*

[14] *throw in your lot among us,  
we will all have one purse" --*

[15] *my son, do not walk in the way with them,  
hold back your foot from their paths;*

[16] *for their feet run to evil,  
and they make haste to shed blood.*

[17] *For in vain is a net spread  
in the sight of any bird;*

[18] *but these men lie in wait for their own blood,  
they set an ambush for their own lives.*

[19] *Such are the ways of all who get gain by violence;  
it takes away the life of its possessors.*

(Revised Standard Version)

The two ways or paths introduced in 1:7 stretch out before the reader. In this section the teacher spoke to the son guiding him onto God's way. "My son" was and is a customary way of addressing a child. It derives from the idea that parents are primarily responsible for moral instruction (Prov 4:3-4; Deut 6:7) (Ross 1991:28).



Fox (2000:85) argues that the base metaphor of this lecture is “going on a path”. The gang advises the boy to come with them, and the father tells him not to go with them, not to step on their path, for they run to evil.

The frequent recurrence of the phrase "my son" in this part of Proverbs indicates that the instruction is especially suited to a young person. This person's life lies in front of him, and he faces major decisions that would set the course of his life from then on. Though the whole Book of Proverbs provides advice to youths, Proverbs 1:10-19 could be of particular benefit to them.

Various individuals have proposed suggestions concerning how one should understand the phrase “my son”. Ross (1991:26) argues that the best explanation he has seen is that the instruction that follows was originally the type of counsel a courtier father gave his son or sons in his home. This seems to have been a traditional form of ancient Near Eastern education, especially among the ruling classes.

In this pericope the wise way (vv. 8-9) does not have the same level of personal appeal, the excitement and hope of power, that the second way provides (vv. 10-19). Its only reward is goodness, as opposed to acceptance by one's peers.

Verse 19 articulates the point of the comparison. The Hebrew word translated "gains" (v.19) implies a money-grabbing attitude (cf. 15:27).

Fox (2000:89) argues that the lecture culminates in a grand declaration of the principle of intrinsic retribution: Evildoers destroy themselves by means of the evil that they themselves create.

Fox agrees with Boström (1990:90) that Proverbs does not usually refer to consequences of deeds but of one's behaviour and character as a whole. Boström prefers to speak of “character-consequence relationship”. This modification is important because Proverbs is not so mechanical as to imagine a precise correlation between every action and result. “The fool will behave in such a way that, overall, his life will be an unhappy one, but the unhappy circumstance may not be the immediate result of the condemned in a particular proverb. Nevertheless, wisdom literature does

tend to formulate retribution as an automatic process of cause and effect" (Fox 1990:91).

#### 4.4.5 Wisdom's appeal 1:20-33

<sup>20</sup> חֲכָמוֹת בַּחוּץ תִּרְנֶה בְּרַחֲבוֹת תִּתֵּן קוֹלָהּ:  
<sup>21</sup> חָמְדוּ לָהֶם וְכִסִּילִים<sup>21</sup> בְּרֹאשׁ הַמִּיּוֹת תִּקְרָא בִּפְתָחֵי שְׁעָרִים בְּעִיר אֲמַרְיָה תֹאמַר  
<sup>22</sup> עַד־מָתִי פְתִים תִּתְּנֶה וְלֹאֲכֹלִים לִצֹּן  
 יִשְׁנְאוּ־דַעַת:  
<sup>23</sup> יְדֵי וְאֵין מִקְשִׁיבִי:<sup>23</sup> תִּשׁוּבוּ לְתוֹכְכִתִּי הִנֵּה אֲבִיעָה לָכֶם רוּחִי אֲדִיעָה דְּבָרִי אֲתַחֵם  
<sup>24</sup> יַעַן קִרְאתִי וְתִמְאַנּוּ נְשִׁיתִי  
<sup>25</sup> וְתִפְרְעוּ כָל־עֲצָתִי וְתוֹכְכִתִּי לֹא אֲבִיתֶם:  
<sup>26</sup> גַּם־אֲנִי בְּאִידְכֶם אֲשַׁחֵק אֲלַעַג בְּבֹא פִּי־דְכֶם:  
<sup>27</sup> בְּבֹא כְשׁוֹאָה פִּי־דְכֶם וְאִידְכֶם כְּסוּפָה יֵאָתֶה בִּי  
 בֹא עָלֵיכֶם צָרָה וְצִוְקָה:  
<sup>28</sup> אֲזִי יִקְרְאֵנִי וְלֹא אֶעֱנֶה יִשְׁחַרְנֵנִי וְלֹא יִמְצְאֵנִי:  
<sup>29</sup> תַּחַת כִּי־שְׁנְאוּ דַעַת וַיִּרְאֵת יְהוָה לֹא בָחָרוּ:  
<sup>30</sup> לֹא־אָבוּ לַעֲצָתִי נֶאֱצוּ כָל־תוֹכְכִתִּי:  
<sup>31</sup> וַיֹּאכְלוּ מִפְּרִי דֶרֶכָם וּמִמַּעֲצֹתֵיהֶם יִשְׁבְּעוּ:  
<sup>32</sup> כִּי מְשׁוּבֹת פְתִים תַּחֲרֹגֶם וְשִׁלּוֹת כְּסִילִים תִּאֲבָדֶם:  
<sup>33</sup> וְשָׁמַע לִי יִשְׁכֵּן־בְּטַח וְשֹׁאֵן מִפֶּחַד רָעָה:

[20] Wisdom cries aloud in the street;

in the markets she raises her voice;

[21] on the top of the walls she cries out;

at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:

[22] "How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?

How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing

and fools hate knowledge?

[23] Give heed to my reproof;

behold, I will pour out my thoughts to you;



*I will make my words known to you.*

*[24] Because I have called and you refused to listen,  
have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded,*

*[25] and you have ignored all my counsel  
and would have none of my reproof,*

*[26] I also will laugh at your calamity;  
I will mock when panic strikes you,*

*[27] when panic strikes you like a storm,  
and your calamity comes like a whirlwind,  
when distress and anguish come upon you.*

*[28] Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer;  
they will seek me diligently but will not find me.*

*[29] Because they hated knowledge  
and did not choose the fear of the LORD,*

*[30] would have none of my counsel,  
and despised all my reproof,*

*[31] therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way  
and be sated with their own devices.*

*[32] For the simple are killed by their turning away,  
and the complacency of fools destroys them;*

*[33] but he who listens to me will dwell secure  
and will be at ease, without dread of evil."*

*(Revised Standard Version)*

The kind of wisdom presented to the reader in these didactic discourses has a definite urban setting. According to Lang (1986:43) the place where wisdom may be acquired and where it must prove itself is in the city. "Wisdom, then, is basically the sagacity and skill needed by anyone who wants to cope with life in a public, urban setting, street, square, and city gates are mentioned, and perhaps, depending on the correctness of our translation, busy street life. Wherever there is sufficient space under the open skies, where the people living in the city<sup>12</sup> are likely to gather, there Wisdom may make her appeal."

<sup>12</sup> According to Lang (1986:44) we should think of the cities of ancient Israel as anything but spacious. "At the time of the monarchy, Jerusalem did not have a Hyde Park with its speaker's corner, where

There are various expressions used to introduce Wisdom's speech. It is said that Wisdom, like the public orator, seeks to draw communal attention to a specific matter by raising her voice (cf. Jer 33:10). Fox argues that wisdom is not elusive and she does not restrain herself to a group of amateurs. On the contrary, she wanders around the busiest parts of the city, while she calls for attention. "Not even study or learning is a precondition for Wisdom's assistance; one needs merely respond to her clarion summons. This means that no one can excuse folly by pleading ignorance of Wisdom's demands" (Fox 2000:96).

Wisdom addresses three kinds of fools: naïve, inexperienced youths, shameless and sarcastic people and idiots. Wisdom directs her demands at the intractable types too. "The reader overhears a condemnation of categories of people in which he does not want to be included. If he is guilty of foolish acts, he can choose to repent of his folly and so avoid joining the wisdom-haters and earning Wisdom's aspersions and threats" (Fox 2000:98).

Contrary to some of the writings of the prophets, Wisdom does not enchant her audience "like one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument (Ezek. 33:32, RSV)." Wisdom astonishes her audience with an aggressive rhetorical question:

### **Prov 1:22**

22 עַד־מָתַי פְּתִים תֵּאָהֱבוּ פֶתִי וְלִצְיִים לָצוֹן חֲמָדוֹ לָהֶם  
שְׂנְאֵי־דַעַת:

[22] "How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?

*How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing*

*and fools hate knowledge?*

(Revised Standard Version)

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anyone could stand up to address the public, provided the topic attracted an audience. Jerusalem was much too cramped for this, and the other cities were certainly no larger. Most likely the city had only one open square - the one just inside or outside the city gate. Here a speaker could stand in the middle of a crowd - or perhaps stand on the city wall and address the crowd gathered below. As a rule, public life took place around the city gate. The merchants could find space to display their goods there, people could meet to talk or attend a court session; and orators might also be looking for an audience there. School my even have been held there, either in market stalls or under the open sky."



It is clear from this passage that wisdom uses the language of the classroom. She communicates to young men who have still to trade their ignorance for the wisdom that both school and life can provide. The teacher understands that the young men are satisfied with things the way they are and they have to strive towards maturity.

Describing the immature young man along with the troublemaker and the unwise is to communicate the message that being simple or immature is not far from being bad and stupid. The rhetorical question is followed by a request to listen. It is also an introductory announcement of the speech:

### **Prov 1:23**

תשובו לתוכחתי הנה אביעה לכם רוחי אודיעה דברי אהכם<sup>23</sup>

*[23] Give heed to my reproof;*

*behold, I will pour out my thoughts to you;*

*I will make my words known to you.*

(Revised Standard Version)

Verse 23 is obscured in many of the modern versions. In the Hebrew text wisdom calls on her hearers to “turn to my rebuke”. The word “turn” was the regular word used by the prophets for repentance. It was a call to turn from the enticements of verses 11-14 to the words of wisdom. And the benefits that are promised in verse 23 are impressive. Wisdom would pour out her thoughts on them and make her words known to them.

Wisdom does not wait for people to pursue her, but issues her invitation. She calls out like an Old Testament prophet confronting people in their daily lives, in the market place. The squares, the corners, and the city gates were the places that people congregated to do business and talk.

However, verses 25-31 respond to those who refuse to turn to wisdom. According to verse 26 wisdom will laugh. This is not heartlessness, but recognition of the terrible

irony of people who are warned of their evil and its consequences and who choose to pursue that evil anyway.

The proclamation is followed by an angry speech. The speaker's anger and displeasure are clear in the introduction: the Hebrew expression for 'admonition' and 'mind' could signify the implication of "reproof" and "anger" (Lang 1986:45). The outrage of the speaker becomes explicit in the following passage:

**Prov 1:24-27**

יֵעַן קָרָאתִי וְתִמְאַנּוּ נְשִׁיתִי יָדַי וְאֵין מִקְשִׁיבִּי<sup>24</sup>  
וְתִפְרְעוּ כָּל-עֲצָתִי וְתוֹכַחְתִּי לֹא אָבִיתֶם:<sup>25</sup>  
גַּם-אֲנִי בְּאִדְכֶם אֶשְׁחַק אֲלֶעֱג בְּבֹא פַחַדְכֶם:<sup>26</sup>  
בְּבֹא כְשׁוֹאָה פַחַדְכֶם וְאִדְכֶם כְּסוּפָה יֵאָתֶה בְּ<sup>27</sup>  
בֹא עֲלֵיכֶם צָרָה וְצוּקָה:

*[24] Because I have called and you refused to listen,  
have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded,  
[25] and you have ignored all my counsel  
and would have none of my reproof,  
[26] I also will laugh at your calamity;  
I will mock when panic strikes you,  
[27] when panic strikes you like a storm,  
and your calamity comes like a whirlwind,  
when distress and anguish come upon you.*  
(Revised Standard Version)

It strikes the reader that this is the words of an angry teacher. She is annoyed with the forced, careless students and she is forcefully expressing her anger. The teacher uses four phrases to describe the essentially negative attitude of the students: they refuse to heed and listen, they disregard her instruction and advice (Lang 1986:45).

Murphy (1985:457) argues that the continuation (vv 24-25) is not a way to motivate a call to repentance, because it describes the listener's' past infidelity. Fox (2000:102)



is of the opinion that although wisdom's message is public, the fools will always disregard it, in the way that others can hear wisdom by heeding their conscience and upbringing. These are the people that Wisdom addresses, admonishing them to take this as a warning.

In the closing section of Wisdom's speech the uneducated young men are no longer lectured directly, but are mentioned in the third person. The lecturer thus moves from closeness to a distance. The reader may understand this as those who had been lectured, have turned against the lecturer and are no longer listening. Still, Wisdom does not continue talking to herself like a speaker whose attendance has dissolved. Instead, she explains to anyone who is compliant to heed the misfortune that would befall those who have turned their backs on her (Lang 1986:49).

Wisdom starts the next sentence with a reference to the students' reply when they are in trouble. The students will then bear in mind their teachers and seek their help. Suddenly, the student admits that "I did not listen to the voice of my teachers" (Prov 5:13, RSV). The teacher no longer bestows her help, because it is too late:

#### Prov 1:28

אֲזַי יִקְרְאוּנִי וְלֹא אֶעֱנֶה יִשְׁחַרְרֻנִי וְלֹא יִמְצְאוּנִי: <sup>28</sup>

*[28] Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer;  
they will seek me diligently but will not find me.*

(Revised Standard Version)

The teacher goes on to justify her decision:

#### Prov 1:29-33

תַּחַת כִּי־שָׁנְאוּ דַעַת וַיִּרְאֹת יְהוָה לֹא בָחָרוּ: <sup>29</sup>

לֹא־אָבוּ לַעֲצָתִי נָאֲצוּ כָל־תּוֹכַחְתִּי: <sup>30</sup>

וַיֹּאכְלוּ מִפְּרִי דֶרֶכָם וּמִמַּעֲצֵתֵיהֶם יִשְׁבְּעוּ: <sup>31</sup>

כִּי מִשׁוּבַת פְּתִים תִּחְרְגֻם וְשִׁלּוֹת כְּסִילִים תֵּאָבְדֻם: <sup>32</sup>

וְשָׁמַע לִי יִשְׁכֶּן־בְּטַח וְשָׁאֲנָן מִפֶּחַד רָעָה: <sup>33</sup>

*[29] Because they hated knowledge  
 and did not choose the fear of the LORD,  
 [30] would have none of my counsel,  
 and despised all my reproof,  
 [31] therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way  
 and be sated with their own devices.  
 [32] For the simple are killed by their turning away,  
 and the complacency of fools destroys them;  
 [33] but he who listens to me will dwell secure  
 and will be at ease, without dread of evil."*  
 (Revised Standard Version)

The essence of this passage is that those who demonstrate their obedience to Wisdom, would not endure adversity and those who reject Wisdom, would suffer the consequences. The poet employs a number of images, intensifying the intent by repeating the same idea in different ways. Refusing wisdom will lead to ultimate destruction, but heeding her call will lead to security.

The first verb of verse 33 is very appropriately "hear", the same verb for both listening and obeying that appeared at the beginning of verse 8. The first instruction and the speech by wisdom uses different communication techniques to deliver the same basic message. Obedient hearing of instruction and wisdom will bring fulfillment and joy. Arrogant rejection of wisdom plants the seeds of its own destruction. Fox argues that Wisdom's discourse delivers a proclamation of the principle of inherent retribution and the consequence of the fool's deeds (2000:102).

When one compares the textual discourses of Proverbs 1-7 with Wisdom's own voice, an additional feature of her speech becomes apparent. The teacher of the didactic discourses lays out defined rules of human behaviour as part of the lesson, while Wisdom rectifies and invites her students.

The opening invitation and closing principle have equivalents in wisdom's speech, but in the latter specific teaching is substituted by the more general topic of relating acts and results. Contrary to the didactic discourses, Wisdom does not teach rules. She



lectures only in order to motivate students to listen and learn. The intent of her discourse is winning over her audience. Wisdom does not support a specific audience or suggest a particular professional ethic. Instead she pleads for a universally sound and binding wisdom. Lang (1986:50) is of the opinion that the contrast drawn between those who listen to wisdom and those who are good-for-nothing shows a total contradiction. There is no middle ground between the two extremes.

This is one of several passages in Proverbs where the writer personifies wisdom. Her call comes to people in the market, in the hustle and bustle of life, not in the seclusion of the home or sanctuary (cf. v. 8) (Trible 1975:509-518).

It is clear here that people have a choice regarding the way they will go. To a large measure their lives are the result of their choices. The fool is one by his own fault, not by fate (vv. 30-31) (Kidner 1985:60).

Wisdom laughs at the fool's calamity (v. 26), not because she is hard-hearted, but rather because it is so absurd to choose folly instead (v. 26). The figure of laughing reveals the absurdity of choosing a foolish way of life and being totally unprepared for disaster. Verses 32 and 33 contrast the ultimate destruction of the unresponsive with the peaceful condition of the responsive (Ross 1991:910).

Wisdom's address refers back to the opening of this passage, v 20-22. "Wisdom went about calling for listeners (though a verb for 'hear' or 'obey' was not used). She concludes by reminding us of the importance of responding to his call" (Fox 2000:103).

#### **4.4.6 Theological assumption: Instruction, obedience and the influence on the community**

We can conclude that Proverbs chapter 1 is directly and strongly concerned with moulding temperaments, convictions and feelings for the sake of the community and the individual's well-being. According to Fox (2000:103) "Wisdom's speeches, which give the essence of her demands, describe attitudes: on the one hand, stubborn, smug disregard; on the other, love and desire for Wisdom"

Here God and humans, wisdom and folly, knowledge created by parental urging (cf. 1:8; 10:1, 4-5) are related in the tight space of eight Hebrew words. Life is caught between the pull toward God and the good and the pull toward folly and pseudo-good. Faith is not opposed to reason but constitutes its possibility, its connection to reality (Von Rad 1975:53-73).

Wisdom is God's fixed order for life, an order opposed to chaos and death. No longer can wisdom be defined simplistically as "the practical application of knowledge." Instead wisdom should be regarded as a broad, theological concept denoting a fixed, righteous order to which the wise man submits his life (Waltke 1979:234).

Ross (1991:904) is of the opinion that wisdom (חָכְמָה) basically means skill. Brown (1996:152) believes that wisdom provides the link between family and community, between youth and age. "Guided by the family spirit of wisdom on his journey beyond the cloistered walls of hearth and home, the son is instructed to avoid all that is strange and wicked as he makes his way through the winding alleyways of public engagement in the larger community."

Wisdom teaches the skills of life of how to make one's way through the normalities and abnormalities of the community. It is not enough simply to be educated and have knowledge; important as education may be. One also needs wisdom, which is the ability to apply knowledge. Wise men and women have the competence to grasp the meaning of a situation and understand what to do and how to do it in the right way at the right time. The wisdom teacher explained the value of wisdom in many ways in Proverbs. In Proverbs 8 & 9 wisdom is put at centre stage to emphasise its function.



## **4.5 Structure and composition of Proverbs 8**

### **4.5.1 The function of wisdom in Proverbs 8**

Proverbs 8 stands out in contrast to the rest of the book. Here Wisdom speaks as a person – not as the father instructing the son as the rest of Proverbs 1:8-9:18, but as Lady Wisdom. It is as if the praise of wisdom suddenly breaks forth into full song with this hymn in honor of wisdom. Or, one may consider that the dangers of sexual impurity are so great that Wisdom must leave the shelter of the school. Here we see Lady Wisdom moving into the streets to go face to face with evil and foolishness. Wisdom will compete for the hearts and minds of the young because too many will be lost if she relies on parental instruction alone.

The description of wisdom is lofty and profound. By taking to the streets Wisdom is seeking to win over those enticed by foolish temptations. Up to this point Wisdom has been the lady that we must pursue and find and win. Now she takes the initiative in seeking us.

Fox argues that this chapter stands in intentional contrast to the previous chapter. Wisdom's appeal is opposed to the invitation of the strange woman (Fox 2000:265). The climatic poem of Proverbs 8 is a highly complex piece. It is divided into three strophes: two framed by means of antithetical parallelism, while the third is moulded in a chiasmus. According to Farmer (1991:235) each word within the strophes is interlinked by synonymous and antithetical parallelism and repetitions. "The whole poem builds structurally to portray Wisdom as the ultimate mediator between God and humanity" (Farmer 1991:235).

The second part of Wisdom's monologue answers an unspoken question: "Why should we believe wisdom's demands?" What makes Wisdom's promises more trustworthy than those made by the seductive personage outlined in the previous instruction?

Farmer is of the opinion that it is similar to the classical prophets who teach their sceptical listeners how they were called to the prophetic task, when Wisdom tells her

audience about her origins. In effect she says, "I trace my beginnings and my authority back to the Lord" (Farmer 1991:237).

Perdue (1994:84) is of the opinion that Proverbs 8 is a well-crafted segment of Wisdom, that contains five related parts:

Proverbs 8:1-3 - The sage's introduction to Woman Wisdom

Proverbs 8:4-11 – Wisdom's call

Proverbs 8:12-21 – Wisdom's providential rule

Proverbs 8:22-31 – Wisdom's place in creation

Proverbs 8:32-36 – Wisdom's instruction of life

#### 4.5.2 Wisdom as guide - Prov 8:1-3

The poem in Proverbs opens by introducing the speaker and setting the scene:

8 <sup>1</sup> הֲלֹא-חֲכָמָה תִּקְרָא וְתִבּוֹנָה תִּתֵּן קוֹלָהּ:  
<sup>2</sup> בְּרֹאשׁ-מְרוֹמִים עַל-יַדְדֵּךְ בֵּית נְתִיבוֹת נִצָּבָה:  
<sup>3</sup> לִיד־שַׁעֲרִים לְפִי-קָרֵת מְבֹא פִתְחִים תִּרְנָה:

[1] *Does not wisdom call,  
 does not understanding raise her voice?*  
 [2] *On the heights beside the way,  
 in the paths she takes her stand;*  
 [3] *beside the gates in front of the town,  
 at the entrance of the portals she cries aloud:*  
 (Revised Standard Version)

In chapter 8, as throughout Proverbs 1-9, human beings are characterised under the figure of young men ready for wife and Wisdom, yet prone to illicit lovers (Van Leeuwen 1999:89).

The rhetorical question in verse 1 implies that an affirmative answer is apparent. Fox (2000:265) argues that the positioning of 'wisdom' and 'understanding' before the



verbs is emphatic. Wisdom's voice is loud and clear. "In naturalistic terms, wisdom's call is the power of reason, heard within the mind." Perdue (1994:85) argues that once again Wisdom is personified as a peripatetic teacher who goes in search of students, inviting them to take up her course of study and learn from her (cf. 1:20-33).

As is evident from vv 1-3 Lady Wisdom is not communicating her teachings in a single locality. She preaches in different areas of similar character: at the high places within the city and outside the city wall at the entries to the gate. According to Fox (2000:267) this shows that Proverbs 8 is not a unique incident or sequence of events but an ongoing, typical occurrence. "The scene and events are temporal: wisdom addresses mankind in all cities, inside and outside the city walls, in high places and low grounds, repeatedly and forever."

Wisdom's appearance at the gate of the city shows her involvement in the life-giving and life-sustaining justice that is at the centre of social and even cosmic life (Perdue 1994:86).

Van Leeuwen (1999:89) argues that the city is the "culture-shape world of humans, a reflection in miniature of the world itself where Lady Wisdom has been active from the beginning (8:22-31), and where she presently speaks to all humans (8:4,31) in their condition of moral and spiritual ambiguity."

In conformity to the rules of rhetoric, the lecture opens with an address:

#### 4.5.3 Wisdom in Prov 8:4 - 11

<sup>4</sup> אֲלֵיכֶם אִישִׁים אֶקְרָא וְקוֹלִי אֶל־בְּנֵי אָדָם:

<sup>5</sup> הִבִּינוּ פְתָאִים עֲרָמָה וְכִסְיִלִּים הִבִּינוּ לֵב:

<sup>6</sup> שְׁמָעוּ כִּי־נִגִּידִים אֲדַבֵּר וּמִפֶּתַח שְׁפָתַי מִי־שָׁרִים:

<sup>7</sup> כִּי־אֲמַת יִחְגֹּה חֲכִי וְתוֹעֵבַת שְׁפָתַי רָשָׁע:

<sup>8</sup> בְּצֹדֵק כָּל־אֲמַרֵּי־פִי אֵין בָּהֶם נִפְתָּל וְעֵקֶשׁ:

<sup>9</sup> כָּל־שֶׁם נֹכְחִים לַמֶּבִּין וַיִּשְׁרִים לְמַצְאֵי דָעַת:

<sup>10</sup> קַחוּ־מוֹסָרִי וְאַל־כֶּסֶף וְדַעַת מִחֲרוּץ נִבְחָר:

עֲרָמָה וְדַעַת מְזֻמּוֹת אֶמְצָא:<sup>11</sup> כִּי־טוֹבָה חֲכָמָה מִפְּנִינִים וְכָל־חֲפָצִים לֹא יִשְׁוּוּ־בָהּ

[4] *"To you, O men, I call,  
and my cry is to the sons of men.*  
[5] *O simple ones, learn prudence;  
O foolish men, pay attention.*  
[6] *Hear, for I will speak noble things,  
and from my lips will come what is right;*  
[7] *for my mouth will utter truth;  
wickedness is an abomination to my lips.*  
[8] *All the words of my mouth are righteous;  
there is nothing twisted or crooked in them.*  
[9] *They are all straight to him who understands  
and right to those who find knowledge.*  
[10] *Take my instruction instead of silver,  
and knowledge rather than choice gold;*  
[11] *for wisdom is better than jewels,  
and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.*  
(Revised Standard Version)

Van Leeuwen (1999:90) argues that this passage uses important terminology from the prologue (Prov 1:1-7) to characterise Wisdom's teaching. Human wisdom is revealed by what people say. Similarly, Wisdom's words mediate God's wisdom for life in the cosmos and are reflected in human language and tradition (Van Leeuwen 1999:91).

In Proverbs 8 Wisdom addresses the listeners. In this chapter all readers are addressed. Wisdom advises them to pay attention and she motivates the appeal by praising herself (Fox 2000:267). Fox argues that "the frontal positioning of 'to you' is emphatic, making it the semantic predicate of the sentence. In other words, the issue is to whom Wisdom calls rather than what she does. Her audience is humanity in its entirety. However lofty her origins and status, Wisdom cares about people, even the less worthy and seeks them out" (Fox 2000:267).



חָכְמָה in verse 9 is not congenital. To have חָכְמָה requires “finding” it. Wisdom herself discovers חָכְמָה and those who seek wisdom “find” her. One has to pursue the correct root values – יִרְאַת יְהוָה – and the longing for wisdom and righteousness – even prior to being educated in them (Fox 2000:270).

Perdue (1994:87) argues that Wisdom is calling to people as she did in chapter 1 (1:21, 24, 28) and will do again in chapter 9 (9:3), Wisdom invites people to pursue their course of study with her and to take up the path of the moral life that she offers.

The tangible representation of ethics throughout Proverbs 1-9 is consistent. Fox argues: “Honesty is bright, straight, directly to the front. Dishonesty is dark, crooked, and off to the side – a departure from the fight and bright path” (Fox 2000:270).

Verses 4-7 advertise Wisdom’s words. The smooth words of the strange woman and the perverse words of evil men have already been mentioned in Proverbs. In contrast are the words of Lady Wisdom. She will speak that which is reliable; that which lasts, that upon which a person can build for a lifetime. Her words are straight to the mark and upright.

Verses 10-11 praise the value of wisdom. Instruction is more valuable than silver. Knowledge is better than the finest gold. Wisdom surpasses the value of jewels.

In the following section (vs. 12-14), Wisdom progresses from acclaiming the qualities of her instruction to praising herself as a godly being.

#### 4.5.4 Wisdom’s providential rule - Prov 8:12-21

אֲנִי-חֲכָמָה שְׁכַנְתִּי עִרְמָה וְדַעַת <sup>12</sup>  
 יִרְאַת יְהוָה שְׁנֵאתָ רָע גֵּאָה וְגֵאֹן וְדֶרֶךְ רָע וּפִי תַהֲפֹכוֹת <sup>13</sup>  
 שִׁנְאֹתִי:  
 לִי-עֵצָה וְתוֹשִׁיָּה אֲנִי בִינָה לִי גְבוּרָה: <sup>14</sup>  
 בִּי מַלְכִּים יִמְלְכוּ וְרוֹזְנִים יַחְקְקוּ צָדִק: <sup>15</sup>

בִּי שָׁרִים יִשְׁרוּ וּנְדִיבִים כָּל־שִׁפְטֵי צְדָק: <sup>16</sup>  
 אֲנִי אֶהְבֵּי אֶהֱבֵי וּמִשְׁחָרֵי יִמְצְאוּנִי: <sup>17</sup>  
 עֲשֶׂר־וְכָבוֹד אֶתִּי הוֹן עֲתֶק וְצִדְקָה: <sup>18</sup>  
 טוֹב פְּרִי מִחֲרוּץ וּמִפֹּז וּתְבוּאַתִּי מִכֶּסֶף נִבְחָר: <sup>19</sup>  
 בְּאַרְח־צִדְקָה אֶהְלֵךְ בְּתוֹךְ נְתִיבוֹת מִשְׁפָּט: <sup>20</sup>  
 לְהַנְחִיל אֶהְבֵּי יֵשׁ וְאַצְרֵתִיהֶם אֲמִלֵּא: <sup>21</sup> פ

[12] I, wisdom, dwell in prudence,  
 and I find knowledge and discretion.

[13] The fear of the LORD is hatred of evil.  
 Pride and arrogance and the way of evil  
 and perverted speech I hate.

[14] I have counsel and sound wisdom,  
 I have insight, I have strength.

[15] By me kings reign,  
 and rulers decree what is just;

[16] by me princes rule,  
 and nobles govern the earth.

[17] I love those who love me,  
 and those who seek me diligently find me.

[18] Riches and honor are with me,  
 enduring wealth and prosperity.

[19] My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold,  
 and my yield than choice silver.

[20] I walk in the way of righteousness,  
 in the paths of justice,

[21] endowing with wealth those who love me,  
 and filling their treasuries.

(Revised Standard Version)

After introducing herself and declaring her powers (vv 12 + 13), Wisdom commends herself as the fount of statecraft, of ordered society itself (vv 14-16), and as the source of wealth for her followers (vv 18-21) (Fox 2000:271). Wisdom presents her essential role for civil or social order (Van Leeuwen 1999:91).



In verse 12 Wisdom does not claim that she is skilful, but rather that she “inhabits” skill. In other words, she has an everlasting link to skill, but is not exactly similar to it (Fox 2000:271).

It appears as if verse 13a, “To fear Yahweh is to hate evil”, is a secondary addition to the original poem (Skehan 1979:368f). Contrary to the rest of the text, it is a proclamation in the third person rather than an affirmation in the first person. According to Lang (1986:73) it is obviously a postexilic pious scribe who incorporated this in a line he associated with “hate” and “evil”.

Lady Wisdom directs herself to kings and princes and she gives life-giving counsel that enables them to carry out well-conceived plans that succeed. “She gives those who search her out and finally discover her not only the joys of intimacy, but also wealth and prosperity” (Perdue 1994:89).

Verse 14 brings in even more of the synonyms that have been used thus far in Proverbs for wisdom. However, the context of verses 15-16 places all these characteristics of wisdom in the service of governmental leadership.

Fox (2000:274) argues that verses 15-16 does not pronounce that all kings and princes rule wise or order honest laws, but rather that wisdom is the ideal of rulership.

People who win wisdom’s “love” obtain immense fortune that is bestowed by Wisdom. Treasures are never disbursed without merit, but only as a compensation for just conduct. The poem plays with the Hebrew terms *צדקה* and *צדק* in a subtle way that cannot be reproduced in translation. The concept should be seen in the light of a righteous and essential order of creation and the community (Schmid 1968:76).

Wisdom is the key to many material and immaterial benefits, but mostly the latter type. Wisdom is better than gold in two senses: the wise man is able to earn gold, and he is able to use wisdom to do more than he can with gold. Yet wisdom is available only to those who seek it.

Proverbs demand that we do more than just adhere to the instructions of wisdom for practical convenience. As is evident from this passage, the authors of Proverbs demand a passionate commitment and a true devotion for learning. This love propels one to seek the unknown and allows learning to impress itself on character (Fox 2000:275).

Love and hate are not merely two emotions among many others in the book of Proverbs. "They are the polar mind-sets that define the basic shape of a person's character. The wise are typified by love of wisdom and hate of deceit, fools by their perverse loves and hatreds (Fox 2000:275)."

With regard to the next few verses Wisdom now turns to a new subject: her relationship to the creator god and his creation. Verses 17-21 address the fruit or outcome of wisdom. In some ways these verses are similar to Proverbs 3:13-18. Verse 17 speaks of Wisdom's faithfulness. Any who seek her find her; and any who love her will be loved by her.

Wisdom functions as a symbol for God himself in this regard. Verses 18-21 again compare wisdom's value with the costly metals and jewels. Thus righteousness and justice represent the truly valuable commodities and it is wealth in those personal characteristics that wisdom provides.

#### 4.5.5 Wisdom's place in creation - Prov 8:22-31

יְהוָה קָנָנִי רֵאשִׁית דְּרָכָיו קָדָם מִפְּעֻלָּיו מֵאֵז:

מֵעוֹלָם נִסְכָּתִי מֵרֹאשׁ מִקְדָּמֵי-אָרֶץ:

בְּאֵין-תְּהוֹמוֹת חוֹלְלָתִי בְּאֵין מַעֲיָנוֹת נִכְבְּדֵי-מַיִם:

בְּטָרֶם הָרִים הִטְבַּעוּ לִפְנֵי גְבוּעוֹת חוֹלְלָתִי:

עַד-לֹא עָשָׂה אָרֶץ וְחוּצוֹת וְרֹאשׁ עֲפָרוֹת תָּבַל:

בְּהִכִּינוּ שָׁמַיִם שָׁם אָנִי בְּחִוּקוֹ חוּג עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹם:

בְּאַמְצוֹ שְׁחָקִים מִמַּעַל בְּעֻזּוֹ עִינוֹת תְּהוֹם:



<sup>29</sup> בְּשׁוֹמוֹ לַיִם חָקוֹ וּמִים לֹא יַעֲבְרוּ-פִּיּוֹ בַּחֲקוֹן מוֹסְדֵי

אֶרֶץ:

<sup>30</sup> וְאַחֲרֶיהָ אֶצְלוֹ אֲמוֹן וְאַחֲרֶיהָ שֶׁשָּׁעִים יוֹם יוֹם מִשְׁחָקָתָ לְ

פָּנָיו בְּכָל-עֵת:

<sup>31</sup> מִשְׁחָקָתָ בְּתַבֵּל אֶרְצוֹ וְשֶׁשָּׁעִי אֶת-בְּנֵי אָדָם:

[22] *The LORD created me at the beginning of his work,  
the first of his acts of old.*

[23] *Ages ago I was set up,  
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.*

[24] *When there were no depths I was brought forth,  
when there were no springs abounding with water.*

[25] *Before the mountains had been shaped,  
before the hills, I was brought forth;*

[26] *before he had made the earth with its fields,  
or the first of the dust of the world.*

[27] *When he established the heavens, I was there,  
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,*

[28] *when he made firm the skies above,  
when he established the fountains of the deep,*

[29] *when he assigned to the sea its limit,  
so that the waters might not transgress his command,*

*when he marked out the foundations of the earth,*

[30] *then I was beside him, like a master workman;  
and I was daily his delight,*

*rejoicing before him always,*

[31] *rejoicing in his inhabited world  
and delighting in the sons of men.*

(Revised Standard Version)

Van Leeuwen (1999:92) is of the opinion that this section serves the assurance for the remarkable claims made by Wisdom in Proverbs 8:6-21.

Wisdom does not relate of her presence prior to the creation in a straightforward statement, but she uses a great display of rhetoric. Wisdom uses six different terms to indicate her existence prior to the creation: “at the beginning of the Creator’s course”; “in the earliest days of his creations”; “long ago”; “ages ago”; “at the beginning”; “at the origin of the earth”.

Instead of belonging to the “days of old”, to the primeval entities of creation, Wisdom was begotten before the world was created. In this manner of speech it is evident that Wisdom belongs to the world before creation. The poet of Proverbs 8 does not leave it at this, but makes the difference between creation and Wisdom even more clear (Hilber 1998:421).

As Creator, God regards wisdom most important. Wisdom is older than the universe, and it was essential in its creation. Nothing came into existence without wisdom. Wisdom leads to joy because creation produces joy (vv. 30-31) both for the Creator and for the creature. God made and did nothing without wisdom. Therefore, it is very important that we obtain it.

Fox (2000:281) argues that the change in perspective from the universal present to the far past is marked by the shift from “before” clauses in vv. 24-26 to “when” clauses in vv. 27-29. These two stanzas, together with vv. 22-23, emphasise Wisdom’s priority in creation. Her own genesis is the topic in vv. 24-26, while her presence during the construction of the world is in focus in vv. 27-29 (Hilber 1998:422).

The beginning of God's way (v. 22) probably refers to the beginning of His creative work (Gen. 1) since that is what Wisdom describes in the verses that follow. Wisdom always existed as an attribute of God. Verse 30 pictures wisdom as God's constant and intimate companion (Scott 1965:211-23). As such we should value it highly.

Verses 22-31 return to the theme of Wisdom’s role in creation first mentioned in Proverbs 3:19-20. These verses provide impressive credentials for Wisdom. Wisdom goes back to her beginnings with God to establish credibility. In the ancient world antiquity was highly respected. That which had lasted the longest had the best claim to authority and credibility.



In Prov. 8: 27-29, the poet moves from the description of Wisdom's pre-existence to a summary on the Creator's work of creation. Wisdom's knowledge of the universe supplies an unchanging point of reference by which to consider the new things that present themselves in human history and behaviour (Van Leeuwen 1999:93).

Yahweh is portrayed as a constructor and designer. As Yahweh is finishing his work, wisdom obtains understanding into the mystic of the universe. According to Lang (1986:78) precisely because of this she is far superior to all human beings, who are straining to put together what limited knowledge of nature and creation they may gather.

On the morning of creation, Wisdom is still a little child who plays and frolics around. Happy play is her first expression of life. Wisdom is the Creator's healthy child, displaying her joy and energy. By referring to her happiness, the goddess also softens the control that dominates the rest of her discourse (Lang 1986: 79). In verse 30 Wisdom is declaring that "while God was busy creating the world, she was near him, growing up in his care and giving him delight" (Fox 2000:285).

Van Leeuwen argues that in God's "economy", all things, including human beings and their various activities, have their proper place and limits. This wisdom principle is grounded in creation thinking. This reading of Wisdom in Proverbs 8 has an antecedent in the book of Wisdom, where the human king needs Wisdom's presence both to rule wisely and to build a temple, because "she knows your works and was present when you made the world (Wis 9:1-12; cf. 8: 4)" (Van Leeuwen 1999:95).

In the final verses of the chapter, wisdom proceeds to her original role as teacher. In a conclusive request that punctuates her teaching by presenting more reasons for the student to obey and acquire wisdom, wisdom again uses didactic speech.

#### **4.5.6 The appeal to gain wisdom 8:32-36**

וַעֲתָה בָּנִים שִׁמְעוּ-לִי וְאַשְׁרֵי דֶרֶכִי יִשְׁמְרוּ: <sup>32</sup>

שָׁמְעוּ מוֹסֵר וְחָכְמוּ וְאַל-תִּפְרְעוּ: <sup>33</sup>

אֲשֶׁרִי אָדָם שָׁמַעַ לִי לְשָׁקֵד עַל-דִּלְתֹתַי יוֹם יוֹם לְשֹׁמֵר <sup>34</sup>

מְזוֹזוֹת פֶּתָחַי:

כִּי מֵצָאִי מֵצָא חַיִּים וַיִּפֹּק רֶצוֹן מִיְהוָה: <sup>35</sup>

וְחָטְאִי חָמַס נָפְשׁוֹ כָּל-מִשְׁנָאִי אֲהָבוֹ מוֹת: <sup>36</sup>

[32] *And now, my sons, listen to me:*

*happy are those who keep my ways.*

[33] *Hear instruction and be wise,*

*and do not neglect it.*

[34] *Happy is the man who listens to me,*

*watching daily at my gates,*

*waiting beside my doors.*

[35] *For he who finds me finds life*

*and obtains favor from the LORD;*

[36] *but he who misses me injures himself;*

*all who hate me love death."*

(Revised Standard Version)

In these last few verses of Proverbs 8 we find the shared forms and themes of sapiential language: the task to attain and not to discard wisdom, the pupil's unwillingness to learn and his derision of the mentor. Eventually the willing student chooses wisdom and thus finds life. The closing passage gives an invitation and warning and prepares the transition to chapter 9, with its banquet scene upon completion of the house (Van Leeuwen 1999:95).

Everything in Proverbs 8 serves the rhetorical goal of influencing the reader to desire wisdom. "The reason the author declares that the earth's potentates avail themselves of wisdom is to make you want to bring this mighty and renowned resource into your own life. It will bring you wealth and honour" (Fox 2000:293).

Proverbs 8:35-36 offers a "summary assessment". Wisdom is again related to Yahweh. No doubt this refers back to the mythological section, an intended reference

to the Creator. Originally, however, the formula “to find favour from Yahweh” may have been “to find favour from the gods”. Lang (1986:80-81) argues that “the gods have been replaced by Yahweh in an attempt to make the poem acceptable to Yahweh-aloneists of the postexilic period. There is only one instance in which the revision did not remove the gods from the text of Proverbs 1-9, and the relevant passage has indeed some similarity to ours.”

Perdue (1994:91) argues that in this final section of Proverbs 8 there is a return to the initial part of the unit: “protrepis – the invitation to take up study of wisdom to experience well being. This closure, where the end returns to the beginning, gives the invitation of Woman Wisdom even greater authority.” Wisdom herself adopts the literary form of instruction. She addresses her listeners as her sons and calls on them to listen to and obey her. The motivation statements come in the form of blessings.

Though the word “choose” does not appear in the text these final words of Lady Wisdom present a call for a choice. As surely as Joshua confronted Israel with the demand, “Choose you this day whom you will serve”, Proverbs 8 demands a choice of either wisdom or folly.

#### **4.5.7 Theological assumption: Instruction, obedience and the influence on the community**

Wisdom and godliness are practically synonymous (cf. 1:7). Verse 9 means that the person who already has walked down wisdom's path for a distance may appreciate the moral rightness of wisdom better than someone who has not. True wisdom is resourceful and discreet (v. 13). This pericope deals with the essential excellence of wisdom.

Uneducated young men are beseeched to attain intelligence and practical wisdom. Therefore, Wisdom uses didactic language. This is the key objective of the school, as the preface to Proverbs 1-9 explains. The standard method of teaching is the speech or presumably the dictation of texts. The texts used in these speeches are didactic or moralistic dissertations like the ones preserved in Proverbs 1-7. The teacher sees her



instruction as noble, honest, trustworthy and just with nothing twisted or dishonest in it (Lang 1986:71).

Fox argues that as a teacher advises pupils to listen to instruction so that they may live and prosper, so Lady Wisdom appeals to mankind, her “sons” and pupils, to listen to her teaching. “The grand celebration of Wisdom – the exaltation of her righteousness, power, gifts, antiquity, transcendence – all leads to the practical conclusion that is good to seek and obey her” (Fox 2000:289). Everything in Proverbs 8 is thus subordinated to the educational goal of teaching to think and live in the ways of the wise. Proverbs 8 is a document of this educational process that inculcated and cemented loyalty.

The reason why court officials and nobles are mentioned here along with the king is easily imaginable: the poem was written by a teacher at the school in which these people received their professional training. “The passage reveals the considerable self-esteem of officials and sheikhs who exercised their office not just in the name of the king (which would actually be true for officials), but in the name of Wisdom herself, to whom even the king is subject and must bow” (Lang 1986:75).

Wisdom speaks in and through the creation and its creatures, which all give indirect testimony to her norms. In contrast to the other speeches in chapters 1-9, Wisdom specifies her addressees as all humans, but especially naïve and foolish people, who may yet change (Van Leeuwen 1999:90).

It is evident from the text that the revelations by wisdom may be reduced to three basic levels. Wisdom has intellectual capabilities, particularly cleverness, artfulness, the ability to make plans and understanding. Wisdom also has moral qualities: she hates arrogance and distorted speech and wisdom has power. The supremacy of wisdom is crucial, because being wise requires knowledge of reality and the events that take place in it, and wisdom can only be gained over time.

## 4.6 Structure and composition of Proverbs 9

### 4.6.1 Wisdom and folly contrasted - chapter 9

Proverbs 9 forms a thoughtfully constructed conclusion to the first nine chapters. It could be divided into three six-verse parts (vv. 1-6; vv. 7-12; vv. 13-18). Of these three sections vv. 7-12 interrupts the parallel sections of vv. 1-6 and vv. 13-18. Van Leeuwen argues that it signals that Proverbs 9 “forms an envelope around the nine chapters through its repetition of key phrases from 1:1-7 (1:7 and 9:10 on ‘the fear of the Lord’; 1:5 and 9:11) and from Wisdom’s first speech in 1:20-33 (1:22, 29 and 9:7-8; 1:29 and 9:10)” (Van Leeuwen 1999:100).

Proverbs 9 brings to a close the series of “instructions” that began in Proverbs 1:8. As such it provides a summation of the major issue – the choice between Wisdom and Foolishness. Murphy (1981:62) portrays the contrast as one between Lady Wisdom’s banquet described in verses 1-6 and Lady Folly’s banquet described in verses 13-18.

“Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn out her seven pillars” (9:1). Why is this statement included? It seems that many commentators are reading this line as a treatise on Israelite architecture and since most houses unearthed from ancient Israel have four pillars, they often alter the Hebrew to read something like: “Wisdom has set up her lattice-worked pillars”; or “The Seven Sages have built the house of wisdom.”

The reference to the seven pillars in the building of Lady Wisdom’s house has generated many theories trying to explain that number. Various scholars have tried to connect it to different ancient buildings with seven pillars. It may be, however, that the number seven is simply designed to express completeness or fullness.

Verses 2-3 imply a royal setting. The only aspect that is not a royal quality is that ordinary people are the ones invited to Wisdom’s banquet. Whybray argues that this chapter contrasts wisdom and folly in a very symmetrical structure. Verses 1-6 display a remarkable correspondence to verses 13-18. This chiasmic form of presentation sets off the central verses (vv. 7-12) as the most important in the chapter (Whybray 1986:42).

There is widespread agreement among commentators that this chapter comes from a somewhat different tradition from the one represented by chapters 1-8. Although, if that were so, the two traditions do not seem to be very different. In the first part of the chapter, vv. 1-6, Wisdom is personified. In chapter 1:20-33 and in chapter 8, there is a public invitation to both the simple and to the fools from the “high places of the town” to her house to accept what she has to offer. According to Whybray (1982: 43) there is an obvious link here with the statement in verse 1 that she has built her house: 8:34bc refers to its gates and doors, 9:1 to its pillars.

McKinlay (1996:38) argues that the style of this chapter is different from both that of the instructions and that of the other wisdom poems. The subject of the woman, namely Folly – a figure who does not appear elsewhere – has replaced the adulteress as the antithesis of Wisdom.

One aim of this chapter is to distinguish and interpret the wisdom figure. According to McKinlay (1996:38), it is important to recognise that the wisdom/woman figure has repeatedly been described as a metaphor. Two contemporary portrayals of metaphor are that it is “that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another”, and that it conjoins the semantic fields of two words in such a way as to create new meaning (Barker 1992:59; Camp 1985:72).

In Proverbs, when wWisdom/woman delivers an invitation to young men to come and be taught by her, the structure may well include some correlation with other literary women about whom one reads in biblical texts (McKinlay 1996:41). “In the Proverbs poems Wisdom represents the Wisdom of Yahweh...the metaphor also comes within the much broader sphere of Israelite ‘God-language’, where it forms part of Israel’s answer to the problem of how to talk about God, the unnamed One of the Tetragrammaton” (McKinlay 1996:41).

When one analyses Proverbs 9 more closely, it is evident that the very name or title stands in need of interpretation. Grammatically, Wisdom is a female entity and she takes the initiative from the very beginning, not even waiting for the verb. Verses 1, 2 and 3a reveal the preparations she has taken. She has set up the pillars, ensuring that it is a suitable home for pleasing guests. She has also prepared the banquet. “We



have here not simply food for hunger and wine for thirst; the preparation is for a lavish, expensive meal, where the food offered is not bread but flesh of meat” (McKinley 1996:46).

In Proverbs chapter 9 it is evident that wisdom is a female symbol who fulfils different roles. She calls to the passers-by going on their path or way. Habel (1972:131-156) has suggested that “path” is the “nuclear” symbol of the poem. The poem functions as “the way” of the female figures. The female figures are dominant symbols who provide the dynamic movement of this poem with their invitations to come by.

When one considers why the deceitful figure here is female, it is discovered that this seems to imitate the position in societies where women are seen as occupying a marginal position within the symbolic order they may be portrayed or used as: the limit or border-line of that order. Woman will then come to represent the necessary frontier between man and chaos, but because of their very marginality they will also always seem to recede into and merge with the chaos of the outside. Woman seen as the limit of the symbolic order will share in the disconcerting properties of all frontiers: they'll be neither inside nor outside, neither known nor unknown.

McKinlay (1996:62) believes that if a canonically aware version of the first section of Proverbs 9 suggested at one strategy employed by this Israelite text “to keep the identity of Wisdom within certain parameters, the reading of the dynamics of the whole mirror-imaged poem has highlighted another.” Two quite different strategies collaborate with extreme consequence.

Perdue argues that the rhetorical structure of Proverbs 9:1-18 comprises of an antithetical wisdom poem that surrounds an instruction. “The poem contains two contrasting strophes: 9:1-6 (Woman Wisdom) and 9:13-18 (Woman Folly)” (Perdue 1994:94).

## 4.6.2 Wisdom's feast 9:1-6

9<sup>1</sup> חִכְמוֹת בָּנְתָה בֵּיתָהּ חֲצֵבָה עֲמוּדֶיהָ שִׁבְעָה:  
 2<sup>2</sup> טָבְחָה טַבְחָהּ מִסְכָּה יִינָה אֶף עָרְכָה שְׁלֹחָנָה:  
 3<sup>3</sup> שְׁלָחָה נְעֻרֶיהָ תִּקְרָא עַל-גִּפִּי מִרְמֵי קִרְתִּי:  
 4<sup>4</sup> מִי־פִתִּי יָסֵר הִנֵּה חֲסֵר-לֵב אָמְרָה לוֹ:  
 5<sup>5</sup> לָכוּ לַחֲמוּ בִלְחָמִי וּשְׁתּוּ בַיִּין מִסְכָּתִּי:  
 6<sup>6</sup> עֲזְבוּ פִתְאִים וַחֲיוּ וְאַשְׁרוּ בְּדֶרֶךְ בֵּינָה:

[1] *Wisdom has built her house,*

*she has set up her seven pillars.*

[2] *She has slaughtered her beasts, she has mixed her wine,*

*she has also set her table.*

[3] *She has sent out her maids to call*

*from the highest places in the town,*

[4] *"Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!"*

*To him who is without sense she says,*

[5] *"Come, eat of my bread*

*and drink of the wine I have mixed.*

[6] *Leave simpleness, and live,*

*and walk in the way of insight."*

(Revised Standard Version)

In this passage we see that Lady Wisdom builds a house, prepares a feast and issues an open invitation. She then explains the meaning of her invitation to reinforce her exhortation (Fox 2000:296). Once more Wisdom is illustrated as a goddess of wisdom and richness who builds her temple or palace and inaugurates her rule (Perdue 1994:94).

According to Lang (1986:86) a suitable title for this poem may be "An invitation addressed to young men." There is agreement among commentators that in this poem wisdom and foolishness are the two powers competing for goodwill with students. Here the agreement ends, because the poem raises numerous questions.

Fox argues that the details of the setting are not important individually, but mutually they reveal that wisdom had a lot to offer and was anxious to do just that. To obey the teaching of Wisdom, “to live within her house, to partake of her food and wine, are different ways of envisioning a lifetime of learning” (Fox 2000:97).

Van Leeuwen argues that the analogy of house and cosmos was also anticipated in Proverbs 8. “After the cosmos is built (8:22-29) we hear of Wisdom’s ‘doors’ (8:34) – that is, of her house. In Proverbs 8 however, Yahweh is the creator of the cosmos, while in Prov 9:1, Wisdom is the builder of the cosmic house” (Van Leeuwen 1999:102).

Van Leeuwen (1999:102) argues that the double invitation of Wisdom and Folly highlights the ambiguous character of the goods of this world. The poet conveys this ambiguity by using the long-established patterns of similarity between the two women.

The following paragraphs will be devoted to verses 7-12, which many authors consider to be a later interpolation disturbing the original text.

#### 4.6.3 Wisdom in Proverbs 9:7-12

<sup>7</sup> יֹסֵר לֵץ לָקַח לוֹ קָלוֹן וּמוֹכִיחַ לְרָשָׁע מוֹמוֹ:

<sup>8</sup> אֶל-תּוֹכַח לֵץ פֶּן-יִשְׁנָאֲךָ הוֹכַח לְחָכָם וַיֵּאֱהָבֶךָ:

<sup>9</sup> תֵּן לְחָכָם וַיְחַכְּמֵם-עוֹד הוֹדַע לְצַדִּיק וַיֹּסֶף לָקַח:

<sup>10</sup> תַּחֲלִית חֲכָמָה יִרְאֶת יְהוָה וְדַעַת קְדָשִׁים בִּינָה:

<sup>11</sup> כִּי-בִי יִרְבּוּ יָמָיִךְ וַיֹּסִיפוּ לָךְ שָׁנוֹת חַיִּים:

<sup>12</sup> אִם-חֲכָמָתָ חֲכָמָתָ לָךְ וְלִצְטָה לְבַדְּךָ תִּשָּׂא:

[7] *He who corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse,  
and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury.*

[8] *Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you;  
reprove a wise man, and he will love you.*

[9] *Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser;*



*teach a righteous man and he will increase in learning.*

*[10] The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,  
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.*

*[11] For by me your days will be multiplied,  
and years will be added to your life.*

*[12] If you are wise, you are wise for yourself;  
if you scoff, you alone will bear it.*

(Revised Standard Version)

Following Proverbs 9:6 one would anticipate a continuation of Wisdom's request or at least an introduction of her opponent, Folly. "Instead, there are a few lines about the teacher and teaching, in what are now verses 7-9. After verse 10 comes a motto on the fear of Yahweh, standing by itself. Then, Wisdom's invitation is resumed and ends with verse 12 (Lang 1986: 87)."

Van Leeuwen argues that Proverbs 1-9 has been predominantly concerned with presenting the message of Wisdom. "The speeches of parents and of Wisdom herself have invited the listener to a banquet of life and have warned about Folly and her counter invitation to sugar-coated death. Now the author advises wise humans, in the second person (vv 8-9), concerning the reaction their teaching will provoke in others (Van Leeuwen 1999:103).

Lang is of the opinion that the insertions "break the unity of the original poem to such an extent that the proper association of its parts is no longer recognizable" (Lang 1986:88). One can only speculate about the reasons for the insertion. Van Leeuwen (1999:104) offers the following hypothesis: "...the original text although consisting of the same material, was rearranged in the process of transmission. The original sequence must have been Proverbs 9:1-6, 11-18, and 7-10. Later, verses 7-10 were transferred to their present position between verses 6 and 11." Von Rad argues that the expression, "fear of the gods", is actually known from another biblical text, and scholars believe that there is something "international" about it. Without being specifically Israelite, it refers to a certain respect and regard for the most elementary of social norms, whose severe guardian was known to be the deity (Von Rad 1975:181).

Proverbs 9:10 places the observations of vv 7-9 in a wider setting. While vv 7-9 focus on chastisement (a frequent topic in Proverbs), v 10 turns the passage into an observation on the religious relationship between intellect and moral character and gives the entire passage this scope (Fox 2000:308).

וְדַעַת קְדָשִׁים בִּינָה could be translated as a establishing of identity: “And understanding is the knowledge of the Holy One.” Fox (2000:308) argues that because the first line outlines the first step toward wisdom (תְּחִלַּת חִכְמָה), we are probably to read בִּינָה in v 10b as correspondence for תְּחִלַּת בִּינָה “the beginning of understanding.” Thus the translation is literally: “and the knowledge of the Holy One is the beginning of understanding.”

Fox thus argues that the phrase דַּעַת קְדָשִׁים “knowledge of the Holy one”, in synonymous parallelism with יִרְאַת יְהוָה, indicates a perspective of capability – religious awareness – rather than cognitive understanding of the deity. “The formally plural קְדָשִׁים is probably an epithet of God” (Fox 2000:308). Knowledge of God is above all a mind-set, a hereditary consciousness of God in one’s life.

Lang (1986:89) argues that one can read Prov. 9:-6, 11-18 as a single entity and forming a complete poem.<sup>13</sup> Proverbs 9 is an invitation to the house of Wisdom. For critics the most mysterious characteristics of this house are its seven pillars. Critics have searched for covert and figurative meanings in the number seven and have suggested a wide variety of possibilities. It seems that despite all the theorising, the seven pillars of wisdom continues to pose a problem to which a solution still eludes scholars.

Houses with seven pillars have been found at the Israelite structures at Hazor and at Hirbet el-Msash (Yadin 1975:170; Fritz 1980:122). The building technique, the architectural design, and the use of pillars remained relatively uniform over the

<sup>13</sup> Other reconstructions of the perplexing textual history have been proposed by Scott 1965 and Goldingay 1977. Scott takes Prov. 9:1-6, 10-12 as the original text, whereas Goldingay finds it in Prov. 9:1-6, 11. These suggestions are attractive because they provide an easy solution to the problem why Folly, as a simple city harlot (see chapter 13), can be a goddess’s rival. The added lines on Folly would assume that Wisdom, too, is just a playful personification.

centuries. Wisdom, who is a noble figure, owns a house with seven pillars and is able to receive a large number of guests. It makes sense that references to the seven pillars of Wisdom's home appear in the context of her invitation to a lavish banquet.

In this chapter the reader of the poem realises that the invitation to the banquet is creative imagery. In reality it is concerned with school and education. In verse 5 the reader is again reminded of the banquet. The poetic image and existence are placed side by side without being combined.

In Proverbs 9:7-12 a constellation of virtues is found. Framed by the respective dinner invitations of woman and woman folly, this final matrix consists of several maxims from wisdom that address the advanced student of wisdom (cf. 1:4-5) (Lang 1996: 41). The principles that follow wisdom's profile as host repeat the sage's obligation to further instruction.

The following verses refer to the fear of God again as the methodological origin of wisdom. The themes of tutoring the wise and the divine ends the first nine chapters in a similar fashion they concluded the introduction to the first seven verses in chapter 1. In these final words of wisdom it is stated that even the wise may warrant rebuke.

Scolding also applies to the wise, but in a dissimilar way from the kind of rebuke that condemns one's peers as simpletons and scoffers, as in wisdom's initial speech in chapter 1 (Brown 1996:41).

Israel's sages seem to have discerned a fundamental order hidden within the universe; this ruling principle applied both to nature and to humans.<sup>14</sup> Discovery of this "rational rule" enabled the wise to secure their existence by acting in harmony with the universal order that sustained the cosmos (Crenshaw 1998:55).

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<sup>14</sup> The appropriateness of this concept of order has been questioned, largely on grounds of Yahweh's supreme authority, but nothing requires the subjection of the deity to this principle. How else can one acknowledge the sages' attitude toward mastering life by studying the secrets hidden in nature and human behaviour? They believed that rules of conduct could be ascertained by careful observation, and they devoted considerable energy to spelling out these rules by which one should live. The primary concern, however, is moral development, not knowledge of the universe.



Van Leeuwen (1999:103) argues that verses 7-12 connects chapters 1-9 to the sentence collections by establishing thematic equivalence.

#### 4.6.4 Follies feast 9:13-18

13 אִשָּׁת כְּסִילוֹת הַמָּיָה פְתִיּוֹת וּבִלְיָדָהּ מָה:  
 14 וְיֹשְׁבָה לִפְתָּח בֵּיתָהּ עַל-כִּסֵּא מְרֹמֵי קִרְתָּ:  
 15 לְקַרְא לְעַבְרֵי-דֶרֶךְ הַמִּשְׁרִים אֲרֻחוֹתָם:  
 16 מִי־פָתִי יָסֵר הִנֵּה וְחִסְר־לֵב וְאִמְרָה לוֹ:  
 17 מִים־גְּנוּבִים יִמְתְּקוּ וְלֶחֶם סֶתֶרִים יִנָּעַם:  
 18 וְלֹא־יָדַע כִּי־רָפְאִים שֵׁם בְּעַמְּקֵי שְׁאוֹל קִרְאֶיהָ:

[13] *A foolish woman is noisy;  
 she is wanton and knows no shame.*  
 [14] *She sits at the door of her house,  
 she takes a seat on the high places of the town,*  
 [15] *calling to those who pass by,  
 who are going straight on their way,*  
 [16] *"Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!"*  
*And to him who is without sense she says,*  
 [17] *"Stolen water is sweet,  
 and bread eaten in secret is pleasant."*  
 [18] *But he does not know that the dead are there,  
 that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.*  
 (Revised Standard Version)

Lady Wisdom has her opposite in Lady Folly. Even though Folly is less dynamic than Lady Wisdom, she shows herself to the community and tempts passers-by to enjoy the feast she prepares. Fox (2000:300) argues that Lady Folly is a literary personification with no mythological roots. "The author is less interested in her than in Wisdom and depicts her in pallid colours, with little narrative development. The motive for the creation of this personification is rhetorical, to create a symmetry between wisdom and folly." Lang (1986:168) appropriately compares the classical device of

“synkrisis” or “comparatio”, in which two persons or points of view are set in confrontation.

Verse 6 describes the cost that Wisdom will require for those who attend her banquet. They must abandon their foolish companions. Almost all the English versions speak of leaving foolishness or folly or ignorance (NRSV: immaturity). However, the Hebrew word clearly speaks of fools or simpletons as the object that must be left. This is insightful both for ancient Biblical culture and for ours. Foolishness or ignorance is not something we are entangled in because we choose to value the abstract concept of foolishness. Rather, it is under the influence of foolish people that we find ourselves fascinated in foolishness. Wisdom’s invitation understands that the journey to her banquet hall will require us to leave some of our companions behind.

Verses 7-12 have been described as “intrusive” and as “miscellaneous sayings”. Each verse can function as an independent saying though the scoffer provides a unifying theme. In some ways these verses provide a transition from the long instruction format of Proverbs 1-9 to the short, two and three line independent proverbs that characterize the rest of the book.

These sayings also summarize the teaching of the instruction section. Verse 9, for example, notes that the wise and the righteous always profit by instruction. There is no end to the growth potential for those who are willing to be taught. Verse 11 reiterates the theme that wisdom leads to life. Verse 10 stands at the heart of these summary verses with the statement, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

The pursuit of Wisdom may seem like a pleasant, but largely irrelevant exercise in our day. Wisdom and Folly are the two main themes in Proverbs 9. Chapter 9 serves as a conclusion drawing together the fundamental themes of the first 8 chapters. Even the form of the Hebrew poetry in chapter 9 is carefully crafted to highlight the importance of Wisdom and Folly. We have here a point-counterpoint arrangement called a “chiasm” which looks like this:

A. Lady Wisdom (9:1-6)

B. Response to wisdom: the wise man and the scoffer (9:7-9)

C. The foundation of wisdom (9:10-11)

B. Consequences of response: the wise man and the scoffer (9:12)

The personification of Wisdom and Folly here is very unusual. Personification itself is quite common in the Old Testament as we see in the verses which present the wise man and the scoffer. These are personified examples of the people who respond rightly or wrongly to wisdom. It isn't hard to find many other examples of this sort: "How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked . . ." (Ps. 1:1); "For the heavy drinker and the glutton will come to poverty . . ." (Prov. 23:21).

Wisdom is freely and openly offered to everyone throughout the holy city. And it is Wisdom herself who is issuing the call. The statement in v. 3, "She has sent out her maidens" should be taken to mean that she has dismissed them. She considers everyone in Jerusalem worthy of the honor of a personal invitation rather than sending her servants out as if to guests of lower status than herself.

Now look at the content of Wisdom's summons. She has prepared her meat; she has mixed her sweet wine with aromatic spices and laid it all out on the banquet table (9:2). And then Wisdom invites us to come and feast with her: "Come, eat of my food. And drink of the wine I have mixed" (9:5). But this is no ordinary meal. "Abandon your folly and live" (9:6). Eat at Wisdom's table and live. She herself is the tree of life (3:18). Her food is bread of life; the blood of her grapes is the wine of life.

Like the word for Lady Wisdom, the Hebrew word here for Folly is in the plural. This is how the Hebrews expressed the supreme expression of something. Lady Wisdom is Supreme Wisdom. Folly here is the quintessence of foolishness. This is supreme Folly at work who is more than a mere mortal adulteress.



#### **4.6.5 Theological assumption: Instruction, obedience and the influence on the community**

Proverbs 9:1-6 personifies wisdom in the figure of a lady preparing a feast and issuing invitations. Verses 13-18 personify folly in the guise of a harlot doing the same. The contrasts between these sections are replete with nuances. Verses 4 and 16 contain almost identical invitations. In view of what God has revealed so far about wisdom, any person is able to determine just how wise or how foolish he or she may be. This is not a mystery. It has little to do with intelligence, but everything with commitment. If a person recognises divine revelation as such and decides to understand it, submits to it, and lives by it the best he can, he is wise. On the other hand, if he rejects God's Word and decides to live his life with no regard to what God has said, he is a fool (Wiersbe 2004:34).

Fox (2000:302) argues that folly is telling the truth in this passage, but her message has "two faces". The sensible perceive her words to be an unintended warning to be cautious of sweet pleasure, "for sweetness is just a coating for their poison".

The instruction in its simplest form, as it occurs in Proverbs 9, may be observed in 1:8-19 and 4:20-27. In these two cases the extent of the instruction is clearly marked out, since the surrounding material is incontrovertibly extraneous to it. Prov. 1:8-19 is immediately preceded by the Prologue (1:1-7), and immediately followed by the first of the wisdom poems in which Wisdom, not the human teacher, speaks (1:20-33); 4:20-27 is similarly circumscribed, as it follows a previous instruction (4:10-19) and precedes the introductory verse of another.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> "These two instructions are particularly illuminating because they exemplify this type of teaching medium in its simplest and most characteristic form. After the introductory verses urging the pupil to pay attention to the speaker's words on the grounds of the immense benefits which will accrue from this, each makes its point clearly and simply. There is, however, no rigid conformity here to a fixed formula; each instruction puts its message in its own way. Prov. 1:8-19 describes a hypothetical temptation scene ('My child..', v 10) in which a band of young ruffians attempts to lead the pupil into crime, and ends with a prohibition ('my child, do not walk in their way,' v 15) accompanied by a warning of the appalling consequences of crime: 'it takes away the life of its possessors' (v 19). The lesson of 4:20-27, on the other hand, is conveyed in a series of imperatives of commands requiring moral behaviour (Whybray 1994:14).

Van Leeuwen argues that Proverbs 9:13-18 and the book's first major section now reach a conclusion. "This passage also sums up virtually every theme expressed in Proverbs 1-9 by means of its repetition of key words. In particular, Dame Folly masterfully integrates the portrait of Folly as a seduction to bogus good, in contrast to the genuine good of Wisdom" (Van Leeuwen 1999:103).

It is evident from Proverbs 9 that the Wisdom metaphor takes its place alongside many other anthropomorphic metaphors used for referring to God. Another interest in this metaphor arises since it is found not only on one occasion, as some author's one-off insight, but proceeds throughout different chapters and poems in Proverbs 1-9 (McKinlay 1996: 42). This occurrence fits the definition that McFague (1987) gives for a *model*, that is a dominant metaphor, a metaphor with staying power.

McKinlay (1996:43) believes that one has to bear in mind that the society which adopted this woman/Wisdom metaphor varied considerably in time, location and interest. That means that their "contextual grounding" would also have varied correspondingly.

Like wisdom, the term "proverb" is difficult to define. The first sense of מִשְׁל (mishle) derives from the verb that means "to be like"; the second, from the meaning "to rule". The former emphasises the analogy that lies at the heart of every proverb, while the latter stresses its paradigmatic or exemplary character. A particular apt description captures the second of these senses: a proverb is a winged word, outliving the fleeting moment (McKinlay 1996:44).

According to Crenshaw (1998:56) there is a quality that discern proverbs from sayings that lack paradigmatic value. Conceivably the unfamiliar aspect derives from the distance that detaches the ancient world from contemporary scholars.

The primary function of proverbs seems to have been the linking of two realms and two ages (Crenshaw 1998:56). In short, the winged word transcended time and space. It joined together nature and humans by isolating a vital correspondence between the natural realm and the social order. In addition, the proverbs linked past generations to

the present. By this means traditional values survived the passing of time, and ethos emerged. Ethos refers to a system of cherished values, presuppositions, aspirations, linguistic usage, and so forth.

According to Lang (1986:94) the reader has to ascertain how and why image and reality are interrelated. "This is, of course, good poetry. One has to read 'creatively'; it is precisely this that lends charm to the poetic imagery. It is not difficult to guess at a reason for the juxtaposition of school and banquet. In the eyes of the poet, learning is as receptive a process as eating."

The use of eating as a metaphor or concept for learning in Proverbs 9 is not unique in biblical literature. Jesus Sirach speaks about the thirst for wisdom and presents Wisdom as a woman who prepares her 'bread of understanding' and 'the water of learning' for her husband.

Possibly the closest parallel to the above passage is in Second Isaiah where the prophet's message seems to imitate the oriental water sellers and bread sellers from the busy streets of Middle Eastern cities. The prophet calls out offering something for sale; unlike the other sellers, he takes no money for his message.<sup>16</sup>

People usually do not live or die because of one decision only. They develop a pattern of life that ends in either death or life. This section helps us see the outcome of these styles of life. If a person is open to God and teachable he will become wise, but if he does not accept this instruction and closes his mind he becomes a fool. The person who tries to help a fool by correcting him will receive no honour from the fool.

#### **4.7 A preliminary conclusion**

Proverbs may give the impression of theory rather than praxis, because it transmits an accumulated wisdom of action. Even in its expression it aims at excellence by means of word-play, onomatopoeia and so forth. Words and speech are important in this book. How a thing is said and what is said, when to speak and when not to speak.

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<sup>16</sup> Isa. 55:1-3.



From this perspective, wisdom forms a body of teaching that is communicable, and is presented as the voice of experience from the past and handed down in the hope of forming future generations.

Clifford (1999: 2, 18, 28, 111) understands the instructions of chapters 1-9 as advice for a youth who leaves home to find a wife and establish a household. The advice is raised to a "metaphorical level" and thus made available to everyone, by the speeches of personified Wisdom. She is to be found above all else, for she is life (Prov 8:35). This gives depth and breadth to the sayings in the following chapters. "Whoever finds a wife finds good" (Prov 18:22; cf. 19:14). This construal is both original and attractive; it suggests a wide lens for the interpretation of the Book of Proverbs as a whole. Among scholars there is a broad (if not universal) acknowledgment that chapters 1-9 function as a deliberate introduction, thus inviting the reader to exercise imagination in interpreting the sayings that follow. The proposed setting may not convince everyone, but it enlarges one's vision.

Another important fact, not simply for the Book of Proverbs, but for the entire wisdom enterprise, has been put forth by Brown (1996). Envisaging the idea of character as the center of wisdom literature, he traces it through the three wisdom books of the Tanak, a "journey" describing ethical character in Proverbs and its recasting (without losing itself) in Job and in Qoheleth. Readers who undertake this journey are set on a way, a way of life, along which wisdom accompanies them. Habel (1972) had already pointed to "way" as a key if not dominant metaphor in chapters 1-9.

The wisdom experience has to be described as a faith encounter. In this chapter, it was argued that the core of Proverbs 1-9 is to be found in the instructions as means of educating people and forming character. The instructions are educational in character and purpose. There is no compelling reason to doubt that they are intended to represent the teaching of a real father given to his son (Whybray 1991:56).

The shaping of Israel's view of the world, and of the activity of God behind and in it, was done in an ambience of faith, and was characterised by trust and reliance upon God (Murphy 1996:125).

The features showed in Proverbs 1-9 provide clear indication that Proverbs display the character of a wisdom anthology. The book contains wisdom more or less carefully arranged, possessing an intensely directive tone. The pronounced didacticism of chapters 1-9 encourages a passive receptivity on the part of its presumably immature readership (Berry 1995:140).

I have to question the assumption that Berry (1995) makes with regard to his view of air of authority as “ambiguous expressions of truth that demand reflection on the part of the audience in Proverbs 1-9”. This reflection depends on the presumption that each individual statement communicates some unquestionable truth. The subordination of the pupil forces the reader to search for contextual validation for seemingly ambiguous aphorisms.

It is no surprise that the densest cluster of virtues to be found in Prov 1-9, with the exception of the introduction, is in wisdom’s own discourse in Proverbs 8. Wisdom presents a character résumé that is meant to bridge the inquirer and wisdom. Wisdom walks the paths of righteousness and justice, and so must also the community (Proverbs 8:20). This last statement concludes wisdom’s confession of virtues before she launches into her cosmic role (Prov 8:22-31). Once again, the communal virtues stand at the climax of wisdom’s discourse and character (Brown 1996:36).

Wisdom means being skilful and successful in one's relationships and responsibilities. I am of the opinion that wisdom equally involves observing and following the Creator's principles of order in the moral universe. This order manifests God's wisdom, which is available to man. The wisdom of the book of Proverbs, then, brings harmony to one's life. By contrast, failure to obey God's divine design results in disorder.

Proverbs 1, 8 & 9 is a collection of wise sayings that is not exclusively religious. I believe that its teachings apply to human problems in general and not primarily to the problems of the religious community or to major theological themes such as election, redemption and covenant. Rather the teacher of wisdom concerns himself with

people as plain, ordinary individuals who live in the world, and with the wisdom and foolishness of their attitudes and actions in the common things of life.

The sayings of Proverbs exhibit several distinctive characteristics. They focus attention on individuals rather than on the nation, setting forth the qualities needed and the dangers to be avoided by people seeking to find success with God.

Proverbs are applicable to all people at any period in history who face the same types of hazards and have the same characteristics and abilities. Proverbs are pre-eminently practical, giving advice for developing personal qualities that are necessary to achieve success in this life, to elude failure or shame. The collection gives the warning that virtue is rewarded by prosperity and well-being, but that wickedness leads to poverty and disaster.

The instructions had to be followed obediently. The basis on which the instructions were chosen is not clearly evident. Proverbs could hardly be said to constitute a “compendium of educational syllabus”, since they are apparently both “incomplete and repetitious” (Whybray 1990:57).

Proverbs 1, 8 & 9 are primarily concerned with obedient teachings with a strong focus on the theme of seduction. The young man is cautioned against the lethal temptation of a whole series of women. As a counter-attraction the young man is presented with the persuasiveness of the father's teaching and of Wisdom.

Perhaps the most important question posed here is how the young man is to be persuaded to set out on the path of obedience, the one which will lead to life rather than death? Another question is why the are teachings arranged in their existing order? According to Whybray (1990:58) it is incorrect to expect to find a definitely logical and extensive answer. On the other hand Lang (1972:27) goes on as to say that it is totally useless to expect to find any logical arrangement in any ancient wisdom text. I disagree with Lang (1975:18) who is of the opinion that Proverbs 1-9 is no more than a “haphazard, loose collection of unrelated material in which no text presupposes another.” I believe that it is significant to recognise that with regard to



obedience, the teachings of Proverbs 1-9 are based on respect for authority, traditional values and teachings and the wisdom of mature teachers.

Wisdom embodies that kind of discourse which is meant to mould and shape the community in its practice, moving strategically from rebuke, in response to the community's failure, to joy, in the community's succession embodying justice. When righteousness rules, the community praises and so does wisdom. Wisdom materialises when the community's conversations reflect divine discourse. Brown argues that wisdom, like the community, experiences the ways of God as an episode of delight, amazement and discipline. "Indeed, wisdom is the community, created to behold and follow the ways of God" (Brown 1996:39).

It would be wrong to conclude that Proverbs is a secular book; its teachings are solidly based on the fear of the Lord (1:7), making corresponding with them in reality a moral and spiritual matter. The book teaches in fact that this fear of the Lord is the evidence of faith, for the wise teacher commands people to trust in the Lord whose counsel stands (19:21) and not their understanding (3:5-7). Van Leeuwen (1999:261) believes "that wisdom's standing in relation to humankind as woman to man, and Yahweh's standing over against humankind/Israel as husband/wife are metaphoric representations of reality whose depths remain unplumbed."

In Proverbs the book's value to character education is revealed on two levels. It helps the pupil "learn", "understand" and "absorb" wisdom and it will convey skill and discipline (Prov 1:2-4). We also learn that morality is the subject to be taught: "in absorbing the discipline of insight, righteousness, justice and integrity" (Prov 1:3). Wisdom brings exterior rewards, such as well-being, abundance, life and health.

Family life, as found in Proverbs 1, 8 & 9, offers a microcosm of the community as much as the temple presents a microcosm of creation in ancient Israelite religion (Brown 1996:40). The order of creation has a defining role in maturing of ethical character. The language of creation constitutes wisdom's unsurpassed position within the confronting context of the "strange woman". The promises of the book of Proverbs presupposes that these qualities are something the reader already knows to be desirable (Fox 2000:76).

The wisdom instruction in Proverbs 1, 8 & 9 is public and universal. Wisdom claims the honesty and integrity of the message, in contrast with the “strange” woman of Prov 2:16; 5:3; 6:4; 7:21. Wisdom offers truth and justice. This claim of wisdom is more than just honesty.

The setting in Proverbs 1, 8 & 9 is an experience in which an adolescent passes the threshold into a different social status. The definition of boundaries is crucial for the preservation of the communal order. These human boundaries have their warrant in restrictions fixed by God.

We have to conclude that the fear of the Lord is manifested in a life of obedience, confessing and forsaking sin, and doing what is right, which is the believer's task before God. Since the motivation for faith and obedience comes from the Scripture, Proverbs relates the way of wisdom to the law.

From the observations of the wisdom teacher anyone is able to obtain wisdom, provided he or she is willing to depart from evil (8:13) and the company of ignorant persons (9:4-6), while devoting oneself to wise teachings. If one desires to be wise, one should be determined and teachable (9:9), and accept advice and criticism, especially God's correction (3:11f). But, although training, instruction and discipline may yield wisdom, the real source and ground of wisdom is God - hence the declaration that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (2:6). The person who seeks wisdom, then, should first seek God.

Respect for the virtues of the right communal relations is the result of receiving wisdom. The “good path”, as opposed to the “crooked path”, is an important motive in proverbial discourse and it contains a strong communal metaphor. “A path can only be formed by the passage of many feet; no line individual can form a path. As such, justice, righteousness and equity constitute the guideposts of the community on the move” (Brown 1996:34).

Communal values constitute the path along which the community should follow; certain instrumental virtues serve as protective guardians along the way, preserving

the community from veering off into crooked ways and self-destruction. To welcome wisdom necessarily involves becoming a responsible and productive citizen of a community whose character is formed by justice and equity by those who have gone before, laying a foundation for those to come.

It is important for parents to speak with one voice and teach what would improve their children's character - such that the children will pay attention to them (1:8-9). Training should commence from early childhood, and is best if it combines both discipline (i.e. the rod, or punishment) and gentle but firm direction (1:9). Children are repeatedly urged to obey their parents and to respect them (1:8-9; 4:1), for such obedience is blessed with long and prosperous life (3:2).

Fox argues that *יִרְאַת יְהוָה* is 'not the best part of wisdom, because it is not part of wisdom, (but it) is one component among many' (Fox 2000:68). The issue in Proverbs 1-9 regarding the fear of God is its place in the learning process. The references in Proverbs to fearing the Lord make this book distinctive and theologically relevant. The demand for faith underlies the whole book. Only a right relationship to the true and living God provides the basis for entering into God's foreordained, righteous order for life and for finding true success and happiness. The fool despises God's revealed order for life and the instruction that would lead him or her into it (v. 7b).

As a more advanced stage of development, a person is able to attain wisdom, and with it, understanding of the fear of God (Prov 2:5). "At this stage, the pupil has progressed from unreflective fear to a cognitive awareness of what fear of God really is, and this is equivalent to knowledge of God. This is fear of God as conscience" (Fox 2000:70). The fear of God is so highly regarded because it encourages correct behaviour, even when there are no socially compelled sanctions or when they are insufficient.

The development of character and the ethical awareness to make the right choices and the moral fibre to stick with them' is the primary goal of the lectures in Proverbs 1, 8



& 9. The Wisdom teacher always recognises the importance of the family as the basic unit of society.

Wisdom as found in Proverbs 1, 8 & 9, in dialogue with *ubuntu* is concerned with everyday life, how to live well.

Wisdom is concerned with the issues facing humanity in general, the typical and recurring aspects of life that face human beings on a daily basis. Much of the rest of Scripture is concerned with those unique events in history in which God reveals himself.

The world view in Proverbs is not mythical or cyclical, but it is concerned with stability and order, the status quo, especially in the social arena; the goal is to live in harmonious relationship with God, others, and the world. This makes the dialogue with *ubuntu* possible.

The perspectives of wisdom are not unique to Israelites, although in Israelite wisdom commitment to God is simply assumed.

The focus is on interpersonal relationships, as well as reflective questions about the meaning of life and how to live it.

Wisdom and *ubuntu* does not address the human condition from the divine perspective, but rather from the perspective of human needs and concerns, and in terms of what human beings can and should do to address those concerns.

Wisdom and *ubuntu* attempts to give expression to the way things are; it is descriptive and not prescriptive, describing and defining the world and the existing social order as a means to live within both in productive ways.

Wisdom and *ubuntu's* claim to authority lies in tradition and observation.

There is no "thus says the Lord" grounding of authority in wisdom and *ubuntu* thinking; rather the truth of life is already there in God's creation awaiting discovery.

Tradition represents the wisdom of experience, both in individuals and in the collective experiences of the community; preference is usually given to age and established and proven ways of doing things.

Wisdom and *ubuntu* are grounded in social structures, such as the family, the "schools" of the wise elders, or the king and the royal court. Israelite Wisdom is rooted in commitment to God.

The basic world view of Israelite wisdom and *ubuntu* is that God is Creator, both of his people and the physical world. As Creator, God has imbedded truth in all of creation; another way to say this is that all of creation reflects the wisdom, nature, and character of its creator, and therefore all of creation is a way to learn about God and his purposes for the world.

Human responsibility involves finding the truth in the world as reflected in how the world operates according to the harmony of its creator, and then living within that harmony of God's order.

Being wise and living *ubuntu* is to search for and maintain the order of God in the world in order to live well as God has created humanity to live. A "fool" is one who does not recognize God as creator and therefore does not seek to live according to the harmony of God's creation.

The way of wisdom and *ubuntu* is an "ethical system" in which humanity is responsible for searching, finding, and doing the things necessary to secure their well being in the world.

## CHAPTER 5: Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9 in dialogue with *ubuntu*

### 5.1 Introduction

In this study the problem of drawing lines in order to confine the moral domain to the formation of character is addressed on different levels. The moral domain is that logical space in which human beings experience that they may be wronged on the grounds of what they intrinsically are, regardless of their possible extrinsic value or usefulness to others.

A necessary condition for the constitution of the moral domain is the action taken by a moral teacher or teaching. Moral teaching should be obeyed as it regulates conduct by the norms set forth by a certain society. It was indicated in chapters 2, 3 & 4 of this dissertation that the wisdom teachers of the Old Testament and the wisdom teachers in African society are on par in describing and applying the norms set forth by their respective societies.

As we have seen throughout this dissertation, the book of Proverbs is in no way an “arm-chair document full of philosophical musings on wisdom” (Brown 1996:47). The obedient and responsible citizenship within the existence of society is of primary importance to the editors who compiled the book of Proverbs.

The maintenance of society is given absolute prominence in the first nine chapters of the book of Proverbs. The underlying question is: Will the son successfully appropriate the teachings of his parents and obey wisdom's words or, would he, like his contemporaries, meet his fate through violence or sexual promiscuity? The text does not provide a conclusive reply. Yet, the last chapter of the book provides a proclamation of sorts.

Brown (1996: 48) argues that in the final chapter of Proverbs, the profile of the “woman of excellence” features a matriarch who provides for her family (31:10-31). In the background there stands - or more accurately sits - a patriarch who has taken his place at the city gate, the place where wisdom exercises her rhetorical skill (v 31).



“The patriarch basks in the respect of his peers and with an economy of words praises his marriage partner (v 28). The book of Proverbs began with a silent son, instructed in the responsibilities of communal life and family fidelity, and ends with an adult male who has successfully fulfilled them” (Brown 1996:48).

We thus see that the book of Proverbs is much more than a compendium of virtues. It is essentially about the journey from home to community and back again, “a *rite de passage* that requires letting go of the parental ties of security to seek one's own security and identity through service to the community” (Brown 1996:50). All the practical and intellectual virtues with which one was raised, from discipline to piety, from diligent labour to openness for learning, find their ultimate significance within the larger network of the community and the values that sustain it.

Adhering to Old Testament wisdom is not only possible, but is demanded from the people if we are to be faithful to the way of God and if we are to implement the principles for ethical and moral living that are needed by the community and individuals. The character, will and work of God underlie the determining principles and central organising tenets of Old Testament wisdom.

Hence Old Testament wisdom remains a foundational basis for any future direction in the argument of values in society. There are recognisable limitations present that may usually be explained by the progress of revelation set in the process of history and to that degree limited thereby in the good plan of God.

Most ethicists are moving away from a deontological and teleological type of moral theory in favour of a responsibility and response type. It is also increasingly clear that Scripture is not viewed as supplying the content for ethical character or decision-making. More popularly it is viewed as presenting a set of witnesses or a set of images (Brown 1996:50).

In the ethical realm holiness begins with *יִרְאַת יְהוָה* (Prov. 1:7; 9:10). With the recognition of evil, the writer(s) of the Proverbs urges us to avoid evil. Nel has studied the frequent connecting motivational clauses with the admonitions in Proverbs (1981:418-426). He argues that the very nature of the motivation embraces an

effective appeal to reason and observation because the cosmic order and ethical order are not a contradiction to one's thought. The understanding of the cosmic order and ethical order is the imperative of wise thought within the frame of the *יְרֵאָה יְהוָה* - the theological "setting in life" of the wisdom: the order of creation is comprehensible. Knowledge of this order is wisdom. It is understanding of one's life as part of the order Yahweh created.

Wisdom and *ubuntu* are related to both the individual and also to society and the community. In part it may well have been a reaction and a protest against a too great emphasis upon group solidarity. Wisdom and *ubuntu* do not constitute a single thought form or a single literary genre, nor the commodity of one single nation. Wisdom and *ubuntu* are not the work of one generation, or of one religion. There is a complexity of origin and a plurality of conscience that makes wisdom and *ubuntu* both difficult and fascinating concepts.

Wisdom and *ubuntu* are certainly directly concerned with instruction, but they are simultaneously synonymous with moral education and the formation of character. The way wisdom has retained its immediacy and sharpness displays witness to its divine origin and content and to its concern for truth, for life, and for how a person relates to his/her Creator.

There is wholeness in wisdom which defies fragmentation and destructive analysis, but yet it contains an awareness of all the elements.

## **5.2 The assumptions of Old Testament wisdom and *ubuntu***

O' Donovan (1973:15-23) argues that there are three main assumptions that a person makes when using an ethical text from the past for moral decisions, conduct, and character in the present. The three assumptions are:

- (1) Universalisable
- (2) Consistent
- (3) Prescriptive

O' Donovan contests Karl Barth's judgment that the Bible contains no "universal" ethical commands. Barth contends that such a claim is an "untenable assumption", for the command of God is always an individual command for the conduct of this man, at this moment and in this situation. O'Donovan argues that Barth has falsely equated "universality" with "generality", that is, a command should be indefinite, imprecise, or vague in order to be universal. "...a command or precept is 'universal' whenever its content and the persons it addresses are indicated entirely by classification; where either the content of the command or its addressee is indicated by a demonstrative, a 'this' or a 'that', a time reference, a proper name, etc., it is particular" (O' Donovan 1973:17).

Each biblical command, whether contained in a biblical law code, a narrative, Wisdom text, or part of a prophetic message, was initially addressed to someone, some place, some situation in some distinctive historical context. We may, therefore, ask whether these commands are only "particular" and not "universalisable".

Kaiser argues that Old Testament ethics are valid because some of its commands and principles have "specific universals" that provide the foundation for commanding the "specific" that is in turn concluded from a general principle (Kaiser 1983:26). Old Testament ethical claims and demands relate to direct behaviour and action. The point is not the authoritative status of Old Testament ethical prescriptions; rather it is their claim to regulate humans made in the image of God. Whether the ethical instruction is in the imperative or the indicative mood, makes very little difference to our argument here. The fact remains that the writers of Scripture are "doing more than offering information": they are "attempting to direct behaviour" (O' Donovan 1973:21).

For the purpose of this dissertation it is not important to determine whether or not that instruction of action may legitimately lay its claim over one's life. This serves simply to report that the Old Testament implies to prescribe certain actions. Beyond this assertion there are other questions that take up the issue of the context in which the suggested conduct could and should be received.



The fact that Old Testament wisdom teaches – and what it teaches, has an internal consistency with the African concept of *ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* has often been derived from specific injunctions, which may contain general or universalisable principles. In the case of wisdom literature, this forms the heart the case for the applicability of Old Testament ethics.

### **5.2.1 The central organising idea of wisdom**

The idea of wisdom can bring us to a point where we need to ask two critical questions: What provides wholeness, harmony and consistency to the morality enjoined in Old Testament wisdom? Is Old Testament wisdom in some sense an ordering totality?

We then have to recognize that Old Testament wisdom literature has a distinctive content and it commands a particular response from the reader of the text. According to Kaiser (1983:28) the first context in which one could define this total enterprise, is found in the Old Testament ethical depiction of God. The ethical directions and morality of the Old Testament were grounded directly in the nature of God. Thus, God required to be acknowledged what He was and is. At the heart of every moral command was the theme “I am the Lord” or “be holy”, as every moral command included the theme “I am the Lord” or “Be holy as I the Lord our God am holy” (Lev 18:5, 6, 30; 19:2, 3, 4, 10, 12, 14, 18, 25, 31, 32, 33, 36, 37, etc.)

In both practical and political life, wisdom and strength or power are not often encountered together. The sages are often without power and the powerful are seldom wise. According to Caquot (1978:27) there is a most natural reason for this: "Whatever its field of application may be, wisdom is improvable; it is the fruit of experience; thus it ripens with age, and it is common to identify wise and old and wisdom with grey hair."

The three words, kings, officials and nobles indicate the people who constitute authority in Israelite society. During the time of the Hebrew monarchy the leading men of a city or village composed a council that managed the concerns of the society. Together with the officials of the royal court, these nobles formed the ruling class.

Using Max Weber's terminology, one could state that the above represents a combination of gerontocracy and sultanism; both of these come under the general heading of "traditional authority." In a society ruled by traditional authorities, the right to make decisions in public affairs and to exercise power is claimed on the basis of the sanctity of the order and the attendant powers of control as they have been handed down from the past, 'have always existed'. To this, Weber adds that in such a society a feeling of loyalty would typically be "cultivated through a common process of education" (Weber 1947:341).

### **5.2.2 The motivation for Old Testament wisdom**

The question could be posed whether Old Testament wisdom can be linked and identified with Christian ethics? Many ethicists have seriously challenged and flatly repudiated the traditional link between the Bible and Christian ethics. In his Gifford lectures Reinhold Niebuhr declared that any use of the Bible as an authority in ethics was to make it "a vehicle of sinful sanctification of relative standards of knowledge" (Niebuhr 1943:152).

For most Christian ethicists the Bible is normative, but the question prevails: In what way is it normative? Kelsey (1975:161) offers three models of biblical usage in theologising that we could also apply to the field of ethics. The first model uses the Bible in an "ideational" mode and sees the Bible as offering explicit teaching for doctrine or, at least, for supplying main ideas and concepts. The second use of the Bible stresses its role as witness and is, therefore, the mode of concrete actuality. But when the Bible is viewed as consisting of images that point to "authentic existence" or to power that is mediated through Christ, then Kelsey calls this third mode "ideal possibility".

Another hermeneutical dilemma arises from the many different types of moral materials in the Bible. There are codes of law (such as the Decalogue(s), the covenant code, ceremonial sections such as Leviticus 1-7); narrative segments with inherent examples of what to do and what not to do – summarised in actions and lives of groups and individuals – separate laws; wisdom literature with proverbs, aphorisms, aphorisms, and riddles; parables; allegories; prophetic preaching; paraenetic

instruction (e.g. Deuteronomy); and eschatological discourse with prominence on ethical living in the present (Kaiser 1983:41). We must therefore look at principles that we use in our moral interpretation of the Old Testament.

### **5.2.3 Guidelines for moral interpretation of the Old Testament**

Some guidelines for understanding Old Testament passages containing moral teaching may be useful at this stage. The following set of principles would assist us in approaching many of these principles in correspondence with the intentions of the authors.

1. Universal moral statements are repeatedly found in Scripture. According to Kaiser (1983:64) some of the restrictions and their examples are:

(a) Some universal or indefinite moral prescriptions often stress only the tendency of a thing to produce a certain effect even though that effect may not always necessarily take place. Thus in Prov 15:1, it is observed that “a gentle answer turns away wrath” even though in an obstinate and wicked man it may actually at times produce the opposite result.

(b) Other universal or indefinite moral prescriptions intend only to tell what generally or often takes place without implying that there are no exemptions to the rule. Proverbs 22:6 urges, Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he/she will not turn from it. This is indeed the frequent consequence of wise parental education, but the text does not mean to hold that there are no exceptions to this rule or that there are no other intrusive factors that could frustrate the good training laid down. Included in this rule would be all characterisations of the manners, virtues, and vices of particular ages, people, or nations.

(c) Other universal prescriptions state what ought to be done, not what actually takes place. Accordingly, Malachi 2:7 says, “the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge” and Proverbs 16:10 affirms, “the lips of a king speak as an oracle, and his mouth should not betray justice”.



- (2) Universal moral truth should often be understood comparatively, even though they are not cast in that form. Thus God “desired mercy, not sacrifice” (Hos 6:6) yet the sacrificial system also was part of his revelation. This, then, should be understood in terms of priorities and by way of saying, ‘this first, and then that’ (cf. 1 Sam 15:22; Ps 51:17, 19; Jer 7:22-23).
- (3) Negative moral principles include affirmations and the latter include negatives. When any sin is forbidden, the opposite duty is urged upon us and when any duty is encouraged, its opposite sin is forbidden. So, when Deuteronomy 6:13 commands us to serve God, we are thereby forbidden to serve any other god – without the text explicitly forbidding it. Likewise, when we are commanded to honour our parents (Exod 20:12), we are simultaneously forbidden to curse them. Stealing is prohibited (Exod 20:15), but diligence in our job and whole tenor of life is, therefore, also set forth.
- (4) Some moral precepts in Scripture will allow for exceptions in some situations on account of other duties or moral precepts that ought to predominate according to biblical instruction. Frequently the author of Proverbs laid down rules for putting up surety for others (Prov 6:1-2; 11:15; 17:18; 20:16). While he does not condemn the practice, which love, justice, and prudence may demand in some cases, the author urges us to avoid doing so rashly and without considering the person and his or her ability to pay off the debt.
- (5) Changes in circumstances change moral precepts; therefore, contrary actions may be taken in the moral realm on account of different circumstances. Thus in Proverbs 26:4-5 we meet two such approaches to morality: “Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes.” But one should notice that we should pay attention to the biblically sponsored reason in each case. These are not two inconsistent or even contradictory rules, but two distinct rules of conduct that will be severely observed, depending on which set of circumstances noted in the text is operable at the time. In one case we are advised to pay fools back in their own coin, with the aim of showing them their foolishness.

- (6) It is important to distinguish between what is being described and what is being prescribed in the character, actions, and judgements of men, nations, and events in the Old Testament. Likewise, it is important to separate those precepts or items that are merely circumstantial and temporary from what is abiding, essential, and therefore obligatory and permanent for all ages. This is the problem of the time-conditioned nature of many of the precepts in the Old Testament that we have already addressed earlier, and to which we would need to return in the actual discussion of many of the passages that are to follow (Kaiser 1983:59).

The above list is by no means complete, but it proposes that the interpreter has more to do than to merely assemble a set of texts based on someone's first reading of the text. The exegesis of the text involves moral announcements or regulations and may be extremely hazardous if these types of principles are not kept clearly in mind and if a good dose of common sense is not used along with all the regular tools of interpretation.

### **5.3 Wisdom in dialogue with *ubuntu***

At first glance it would seem difficult to explain Proverbs to any significant extent as a literary work. Wolfgang Mieder, a leading proverb scholar argued that the proverb in a collection is dead (Fontaine 1982:45). The book of Proverbs is a collection of smaller collections, variously containing sayings, admonitions and instructions. It was compiled over several centuries and bears the stamp of its diverse origins in the headings of its sub-collections.

It is important to recognise that Mieder's declaration focuses on another problem and *ubuntu* helps us to understand that problem. The usual contexts for proverbs are the face-to-face situations of daily life. A mother rouses her lazy son, invoking the principle: "The early bird gets the worm." A father cautions his teenage son, who is hanging out with the wrong crowd, "He who sleeps with puppies, catches fleas" (Nigerian proverb).

Seitel (1999:125-143) has called such everyday use of proverbs "the social use of metaphor". Van Leeuwen (1999:256) is of the opinion that the proverb provides a

metaphor that illuminates the essence of a problem issue. "It 'hits the nail on the head.' Yet it can do this from different points of view and with different implications."

Van Leeuwen also believes that the interactive context of meanings gets lost in a collection. Isolated from life, a book of compact sayings may not seem to say to much at all. Oral proverbs are consequently highly dependent upon context and implicit cultural knowledge (1999:257). The teachings in Proverbs do not easily expose their setting in life.

The most pervasive and fundamental collective experience of the African people is their religious experience. It is integrated on a daily basis into all aspects of their lives. It is important that a theoretical framework of powerful strategic ideas must try and make reference to the African religious and cultural experience if effective transfer and adaptation are to take place (Mbigi 1993:2).

These arguments, as well as a deeper understanding of *ubuntu* (chapter 2 of this dissertation) and of wisdom (chapter 3 & 4 of this dissertation) points to a dialogue between wisdom and *ubuntu*:

- When parents admonish a child: "please do not shame the name of the family" (clan); the assumption is that the child represents the family interests. Among the communities of Africa and ancient Israel honour is the direct opposite of shame. Shame functions as a mechanism to demote someone's image in society. Honour has the direct opposite effect. Honour ascribed by the community plays a more important role than individual meritorious achievement.

In previous sections of this dissertation (2.4.4; 3.4; 4.3.1.4; 4.3.1.7; 4.3.3.1) the following was argued: To understand education, respect and obedience in an *ubuntu* society, an understanding of honour and shame is important. Honour and shame may be described as "socially proper attitudes and behaviour in the area where the lines of power, gender, status and religion intersect" (Malina 1993:31). Honour is a claim to worth that is publicly acknowledged. In a society where *ubuntu* functions there is great deal of concern for reputation and respect. An effort is always made to act in a



manner that would not bring shame and ridicule to persons as individuals, families, clan or tribe.

In Proverbs, a father reflects on the continuity of the wisdom tradition and his role in that important undertaking (Prov 4:1-5). Appealing to his son to listen, the teacher recalls his own education at the feet of his father, and repeats the promise of long life and the admonition against deafness.

The purpose of the lecture in Proverbs 1-9 as a whole is to urge students to embrace the instruction that is taught.

- Religion is not understood as a sphere differentiated abstractly from other issues of life, but it is an indivisible part of daily life.

In previous sections of this dissertation (2.3; 3.3; 3.4; 3.8; 3.9.1) the following was argued: Old practices of *ubuntu* indicate various similarities between aspects of religion and *ubuntu* (Broodryk 1997:161). Sparks (1990:285) stresses the rediscovery of black cultural authenticity or aspects of African tradition as “the ancient religious concept of *ubuntu*, the unity of humanity and God, and the oneness of community”.

“Africans are notoriously religious and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it. A study of these religious systems is, therefore, ultimately a study of the peoples themselves in all the complexities of both traditional and modern life” (Mbiti 1971:1).

A considerable number of beliefs and practices are to be found in any African society. These are not, however, formulated into a systematic set of dogmas which a person is expected to accept. People simply assimilate whatever religious ideas and practices are held or observed by their families and communities.

It is generally acknowledged that Israelite wisdom literature was written within the framework of Yahwism and is, therefore, either explicitly or implicitly religious in the sense that it relates to the religion of the Hebrews. According to Gordon (1975:38)

they may well have never considered whether it was divine or profane, human or heavenly. From a modern vantage point, we regard wisdom in Israel as a component of the life of a nation that ascribed all things as coming under Yahweh.

- Wisdom and *ubuntu* maintain that an individual's humanity is indivisibly bound with others and, therefore, no individual is an island. Hence an individual is understood only within and through his or her clan. In African traditional and ancient Israel existence any person living in the village is seen as a neighbour in a tribal community; as a kinsman, collaborator, fellow defender of the village, fellow council member and ally. Anyone outside of this unit is seen as a rival and an intruder.

In previous sections of this dissertation (2.2; 2.3; 2.4; 3.1; 3.4; 3.5) the following was argued: Since human beings need to have an integrated life, there should be a direct correlation between words and actions. Only one's community is able to testify whether a person has *ubuntu*. If one's life, community and world are adversely affected because that person is untrue to his/her mode of existence, one's humanity is compromised. Consistent denial of one's humanity will lead the community to brand one as a non-person. This is a severe punishment, because that person is cut off from the community. Conversely, if one should do something exceptionally admirable, the greatest compliment that could be given is to call one "human". "That person is *Munthu*," is a very high compliment indeed.

Mbigi (1993:24) mentions *ubuntu* as "*unhu*" which, literally translated, means "a man is a man" – which forms the values of the African tribal village community. Similarly, man is entitled to unconditional respect and dignity.

Simplified, the concept underpins the very communal nature of African society and by extension its ethics. The well-being of the individual and his or her interests are ensured through the community where the community becomes a web of relationships. This is well expressed in the Zulu saying, *Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (You are a person through others). In other words, the well-being of the individual and his/her interest is guaranteed by the community.

In the same manner Brown (1996:14) argues that the principle goals of wisdom among traditions that are transmitted and shaped by the community, cannot operate independently of the formation of character.

In Proverbs the familial spirit of wisdom the son is instructed to avoid all that is strange and wicked as he progresses through the larger community. Wisdom provides the inextricable link between family and community, no less youth and age. As the straight pathway to maturity, she gently and gradually replaces the parental hand of guidance that has brought the child to the threshold of adulthood.

As we study selected texts that point to the wisdom paradigm, we again discover its subordinate role. It presents a vision of the right way that leads to life. This way becomes known through recognising God's design embedded in creation and through living in harmony with that design. When one ponders about the substance of that life to which the way of wisdom leads, the relevant texts would guide one into the realm of the community and the responsibility towards the family paradigm again.

- Disagreement with one's superiors is perceived as disrespectful towards seniority. Subordinates prefer that the superiors should give direction, and the subordinates would in turn trust the direction given. The right to make decisions in traditional settings is left to superiors and leaders.

In previous sections of this dissertation (2.4.3; 2.4.4; 3.1; 4.3.1.7; 4.3.8.4) the following was argued: *Ukuhlonipha* (respect) is the very essence of *ubuntu*, but this runs counter to mass democracy, as all actions are to be executed within the tightly defined *ukuhlonipha* relations. Leadership, for instance, is not to be questioned.

In the field of education, respect and obedience two styles of tuition of *ubuntu* may be distinguished, namely the verbal transfers from generation to generation and formal verbal/written school education (Mdluli 1987:67).

When a person is at work, *ubuntu* requires – irrespective of the career being followed – to respect at all times those who have been appointed as supervisors. In the event of a clash of ideas and interests, the person in question should behave as the minor party in obedience.



Discipline is a very important aspect of *ubuntu*. One cannot associate *ubuntu* with aggression, disorder or chaos. Nevertheless, openness has to prevail. If there is a lack of openness it could result in disorder where there is no discipline (Broodryk 1997:49).

In Proverbs 1 - 9 the purpose of the lectures is to urge students to embrace the instruction that is taught. Using poetic form and his appeal to Wisdom as the supreme authority, the teacher induces the essential focus to himself and his subject matter. The figure talking in the poem is not just an ordinary teacher, but Wisdom in person, whose voice carries greater dignity and higher authority.

In the final verses of the Proverbs 9, Wisdom proceeds to her original role as teacher. In a conclusive request that punctuates her teaching by presenting more reasons for the student to obey and acquire wisdom, Wisdom again uses didactic speech. Respect has to be shown to authority, irrespective of whether one agrees or not with the views of the authority figure, in order that things proceed smoothly in all kinds of work situations. There are always people appointed to manage such undertakings and if one is at work, no matter what job is entailed, “even in the mines”, it should be remembered that one has to respect all one's senior colleagues at all times.

- Individualism destroys the community and has a destructive effect on a person. The anthropology and worldview of wisdom and *ubuntu* is community based. It is the group and not so much the individual that determines one's identity. In popular jargon: a person is a person through other persons. Wisdom and *ubuntu* teach that one's humanity is embedded in others. The individual experiences the social system as providing him or her with a sense of identity.

In previous sections of this dissertation (2.3; 2.4.2; 3.2; 3.9; 3.11.2; 3.13; 4.2; 4.3.1.4) the following was argued: *Ubuntu* defines the individual in terms of his/her relationship with others (Shutte 1993:46f). According to this definition, individuals only exist in their relationships with others and as these relationships change, so do the characters of the individuals. Thus understood, the word “individual” signifies a plurality of personalities corresponding to the multiplicity of relationships in which

the individual in question stands. Being an individual by definition means “being-with-others”. *Ubuntu* unites the self and the world in a peculiar web of reciprocal relations in which subject and object become indistinguishable, and in which “I think, therefore I am”, is substituted for “I participate, therefore I am” (Shutte, 1993:47).

African communities appear to have a tendency towards collectivism. Khoza (1994:6) describes collectivism, in contrast to individualism, as any of several types of social organisation in which the individual is seen as being subordinate to a social collectivity such as a state, a nation, a race, a social class. Individualism is seen as its opposite, because the rights and interests of the individual enjoy supremacy.

Wisdom is something that unites people, rather than dividing them (Westermann 1995:1). Wisdom is related to God’s actions of blessing, and so it grows as it accompanies and dwells within a person.

In Proverbs the underlying basis of life and human experience is one's relationship with God. That relationship gives rise to moral understanding and a perception to judge what is right (2:6-22), a proper attitude toward material possessions (3:9-10), industrious labour (6:6-11), the necessary equilibrium and sense of security for living in the world (3:21-26), and the right relationship toward one's neighbour (3:27-29), to mention but a few of the more practical benefits of that personal relationship.

- In wisdom and *ubuntu* communities deviance is the result of a disregard and disrespect for teachers. Deviance is regarded as the disturbance of the harmony of society, and such behaviour is regarded as rooted in evil.

In previous sections of this dissertation (2.1; 2.3; 2.4.1; 2.4.2; 2.4.3; 2.4.4; 3.10; 4.2; 4.3.1.5) the following was argued: The integrity of the human being is of the highest importance. Humans should have an integrated life where words and actions should form a harmonious whole. Only the community can testify whether the relevant individual has *ubuntu*. If one’s life, community and world are adversely affected because one is untrue to the prescribed mode of existence, the individual's humanity is compromised. Consistent denial of that person's humanity will lead the community to brand one as a non-person. This is a severe punishment, because that person is cut off

from the community. Conversely, if one does something exceptionally admirable, the greatest compliment that could be given is to call one “human”. “That person is *Munthu*”, is a very high compliment indeed.

Wright (1983:154) argues that wisdom set out the rules of life for an individual who wishes to be a member of a prosperous society and who is searching for the right way to develop and expand a God fearing conscience.

#### **5.4 The “obedient” approach to wisdom and *ubuntu***

The contents of wisdom ethics are also the contents of Biblical theology. The same law is the basis of every department of Israelite life and the sages lived under this regimen in the same way as did the prophets or the priests. The motives which moved the sages to advocate certain forms of obedient behaviour were often more humanistic and more utilitarian than those cited by prophets and lawgivers; but their notions of right and wrong, good and bad, were shared equally by all of Israel’s ethical teachers.

Spangenberg argues that Biblical theology should be able to differentiate between the “timeless truths and historical wrapping” (1994:445). The forms in which Biblical theology is presented by the sages as “truths” in their instruction to obedience, differed from those used by prophets and priests and historians. The sages offer ethical choices and various alternative motives are cited and in the majority of instances the corresponding decision is left up to the reader. This is an open-ended approach which could avoid the pitfalls of Old Testament theology. Simultaneously the absence of dogmatism enables each individual enquirer to apply the general ethical principles of the law according to each particular situation.

Any study of Hebrew life should lead to a continual awareness of the particular *Sitz im Leben* in Israel, when one examines the work of the sages. There can be no easy transfer of Job’s wrestling or Qohelet’s sceptical musings, to contemporary society, but the humanism which is a constituent part of wisdom literature gives a reality to the situation in which Job, the sceptic and the sages found themselves. They were pragmatic existential men who lived in a real world and who sought to relate the material, the utilitarian, the eudemonistic and the uncertainties which are components



of everyman's life to the facts of a Most High God, who is just, loving, merciful and righteous, who both created the wonders of the universe and who chose Israel as the vehicle of his redemption.

This is as true and perhaps more so, of the wisdom literature as it is of any other part of the Bible. The development which occurs in the phenomenon of wisdom is one illustration of that process of maturation which takes place in all the major constituents of Israelite religion over the course of her history. Israel's idea of God, of law of covenant, of her purpose, and her concept of wisdom, all underwent considerable developments.

The settled body of principles for the sages was the law, and they faithfully sought to apply them. At the same time they were intensely conscious of the reality of the world in which they lived. The ethicists of this century may well have a real debt to the spirit of openness which seems to have found one of its earliest expressions in the wisdom literature of the ancient Near East.

Wisdom and *ubuntu* have a bridging potential through which they can enable faith and reason to maintain a state of dialogue. This would be possible, because the sages, regarded the world very seriously, as they experienced it.

Broodryk (1997:187) argues that the majority of white people in South Africa are Christians and they believe in the Ten Commandments which, in Deuteronomy 5, forbid murder, adultery, theft, false evidence against others, the desire of having another's wife, house, land or anything else that belongs to somebody else. "It may be argued that *ubuntu* makes provision for all these commandments – there is no stress between these commands and *ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* and the commandments are similar" (Broodryk 1997:188).

*Ubuntu* is a concept which is known to all Africans in different words and concepts, but the underlying human characteristics appear to be similar. It was transferred verbally through generations and presented as a worldview, which gave order to African society.

It is important to note that *ubuntu* is in line with a certain world spirit. Prinsloo (1995:15) argues that many prominent people in business, for example, started to feel the need for another view of what a human being is. "In our own situation well known and eminent scientists in the fields of industrial psychology and business economics developed and are developing programmes on the basis of participating management in order to both accommodate human dignity and promote production."

Mandela (1994:21) says that his own opinion will often represent a consensus of what he heard in discussions: he regards the leader as a shepherd who stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble to go on ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realising that all along they are being directed from behind. This approach has the potential of becoming an exciting leadership style in management and practical politics. This type of leadership could be interpreted as subtle leadership based on a bottom-up approach, instead of a rigid top-down approach, as one would expect for instance in a military situation.

The definitions of *ubuntu* was discussed in this thesis and it became clear that obedience to this different worldviews are in line with a certain type of obedience that are also taught by wisdom literature in the Old Testament.

#### **5.4.1 The search for a new moral standing from wisdom and *ubuntu***

It would help our understanding to turn to Aristotle's discussion of practical wisdom in searching for an understanding of the concept of obedience. Aristotle defines practical wisdom as the virtue by which one deliberates well in a practical way. Practical wisdom is like a craft such as medicine: it does not seek to realise health, but the human good without restriction; and in this it takes its cue from an explicit, comprehensive, substantial vision of that human good. This relates to a vision invested with a content that is opposite to which morally inferior natures would aim (Broadie 1991:179, 198).

This blueprint of the good then guides its possessor in all his deliberations, and in terms of which his rational choices could be explained and justified. A choice reflects practical wisdom only if two conditions are satisfied:

- (1) Given the facts as seen by the agent, enacting the choice would lead to the realisation of his grand picture;
- (2) His grand picture is a true or acceptable account of the good (Broadie 1991: 199)

Aristotle said that moral excellence contributes to wisdom by making the end right and that wickedness corrupts and distorts our vision of the end. Broadie (1991:199) believes that Aristotle holds that one cannot be considered morally excellent in the full sense unless one has practical wisdom too. This does not imply that whenever the situation especially calls for courage, it also especially calls for an exercise of practical wisdom, since often it takes mere character to know what to do and not any special intelligence or power of reflection. Aristotle's position implies, rather, that courage is not truly courage unless it is consistently at the service of the *orthos logos* - a consistency which depends on the agent's general ability to come up with the right prescription even when not immediately obvious to a well-brought-up person.

An understanding of Aristotle's ideas about morality requires an understanding of the observations about, or descriptions of, the natural order in which they are grounded. Aristotle describes a natural being as having an end or function peculiar to itself, as having a tendency to realise a particular nature.

Throughout this study the approach has been clear in its conviction that, subsequent to the collapse of the national state, Israel's application of the wisdom tradition, was markedly different from the practice which had earlier prevailed. The fact that Israel went through some rather dramatic changes with regard to both sociological and political perspectives, had a profound impact on the wisdom tradition.

A few factors contributed to pressures for change:

- The need for a way of life separated from a formal cult centre.
- The need to define an acceptable moral code based on experience and observation.
- The need for an approach to human problems based on a belief in their inherent solubility by means of critical observation and insight.



The above requirements were also present in the wisdom tradition. Clements (1991:154) argues that wisdom took Judaism into the spreading and helped to turn the hostile environment of unclean lands into the more acceptable one of a realm of order and design which could be discovered and its rules followed out.

If we are able to discern development in wisdom, it is because these features have been brought about because wisdom was concerned with integrating all aspects of life into one ordered whole. The loss of "centre" in the temple of Jerusalem and the royal throne demanded the provision of a new "centre" around which intellectual wisdom became more bundled. The new "centre" was found in wisdom by which the world had been designed and through the mechanisms of which life was controlled (Clements 1991:155).

It is also evident that wisdom veered towards a universalist understanding of human needs and obligations, such as matters of health and politics. Therefore, wisdom was concerned with all aspects of human relationships, with the formation of character and with the defining of a concept of virtue. It is better to seek happiness and prosperity than enjoy the accessible fruits of wickedness. The first step along the path of wisdom had to be found in fear for the Lord, the Creator of all.

To acknowledge that wisdom could provide a dependable guide to the problems of living had to be initiated by an initial attitude of reverential fear - this was the indispensable first step of commitment without which the voice of wisdom could not be heard. Such an appeal to the fact of a divine Source and Ground of wisdom meant that it became a truly theological and spiritual feature of Jewish life.

#### 5.4.2 Beyond Proverbs 1-9: *Ubuntu* amidst corruption

The primary virtues of justice, righteousness and fairness remain very general in both the first nine chapters of Proverbs and in *ubuntu*. These virtues are outlined as depicting the centre of sapiential discourse, but without any specific description.

One could argue that the virtues are simply vague and idealised concepts that have lost their primary force. One may further ask whether they are simply code words meant to maintain the interests of the *status quo*?

It is, however, evident that the teachers of wisdom and *ubuntu* are witnesses to a community that they perceive to be on the brink of collapse. The father warns his son against exploitation for the sake of advantage. We have to take note that exploitation and violence were prevalent in a community struggling to restore itself during the postexilic period.

Wisdom and *ubuntu* address such a condition of social misfortune. A great deal of attention is focused upon the family, with the silent son listening to the teaching of his parents. Inevitably the question arises: Why is the focus placed specifically on the family? The answer is simple. The family is seen as the invincible bastion of ideological innocence. It is also inevitable, since every individual has or had a family. The family provides amongst all social spheres the strongest motion and grounds for shaping and reorienting the praxis of the community.

It is important to note that Prov 1 - 9 was intended to serve as a consolidating focus to the book as a whole. The categories of justice, righteousness and equity form the foundation for the book. The first nine chapters direct the ancient as well as the modern reader among the excess of principles and themes that outline the fundamental virtues presented by the character of parent and wisdom. “these initial instructions and profiles provide an organising paradigm designed to guide the reader in the act of reading, listening and appropriating the myriad of proverbial sayings that begin in chapter 10. If the reader maintains the subject position of the silent adolescent beyond chapter 9, he or she will discover a host of various characters, a

virtual cavalcade of heroes and scoundrels in the quest for profiled initially by the parent” (Brown 1996:43).

The reader would inevitably come to the point to ask whether righteousness, justice and fairness are empty categories? They are rooted in specific action, on the levels of both public organisation and individual behaviour. Brown (1996:47) argues that such language is not unlike that of the classical prophets in many instances. The widow, the needy, and the poor assume significant positions in sapiential instruction as they do in prophetic discourse. As in the prophets, the way in which the poor are treated provides nothing short of a test for determining the community's character, as it is defined by the moral trait of justice, righteousness, and equity.

Paradigmatic human existence was shown to be existence in a community, structured along familial lines. Fulfilment of life, to use a contemporary term, was not accomplished along individualistic lines, as for example, through personal adventure or professional accomplishment. The purpose of life was embedded in the texture of the generations and it entailed participation as a member of a community (and ultimately of humanity) where relationships were understood on the model of genealogy.

Life in familial society was seen as existence in a specific place on the map. Every tribal unit was to possess land, the means of production and sustenance, living on its “inheritance” as God’s guests.

The characterisation of social responsibilities as hospitality sustains the righteousness of intimately knit groups and of private property. It is different from brotherhood where long-range and consequential belonging is replaced by instantaneous and superficial association. It is also different from consolidated ownership with its disposition to create a classification of the advantaged and disadvantaged. Life in Old Testament Wisdom and life as understood by *ubuntu* is life with a promise of new brothers and sisters, parents and children.

The familial paradigm is the centre and goal of the Old Testament and *ubuntu* ethos. There are simultaneously four other Old Testament paradigms, each of which



encompasses all of life in its own way. They are, however, not competing but supporting models for the familial paradigm. The priestly, sapiential, royal and prophetic paradigms are distinctive models of seeking the same God-willed life, not new definitions of it. Stated differently, they are ways toward living ethically, not the contents of such living.

In summary one could maintain that *ubuntu* and the Old Testament's ethical directive points the way to genuine God-intended humanity. To be truly human in this sense is to be holy, to be wise, to be just, and to serve, if necessary to the point of suffering. True humanity both embraces and transcends these distinctive ethical pursuits.

### **5.4.3 The way of the individual**

We need to undergo a certain reorientation in our established pattern of ethical thought in this matter, if we are to see things from an Old Testament viewpoint (Wright 1983:70). We are inclined to begin at the individual level and work outwards. Our emphasis is to influence people to live a certain kind of life according to this and that exemplary standard. If enough individuals live up to such-and-such a morality, then, almost as a by-product, society itself will be improved or at least maintained as a healthy, happy, safe setting for individuals to pursue their personal goodness. If this is the kind of person one should be; then that kind of community is a bonus in the background.

Wisdom and *ubuntu* tend to place the significance the other way around: here is the kind of community the God wants. God's desire is for sanctified people for his own ownership, a redeemed fellowship, a model brotherhood through whom He can demonstrate an example of the new humanity of his supreme redemptive purpose.

The following questions now arise: If this is the kind of society God would wish for, what kind of person should one be, once one belongs to it? How could anyone live a life worthy of the calling one has received? In an attempt to answer such questions, one has to say that individual ethics are derived from the theology of the redeemed people of God. Individual ethics in the Old Testament, just as much as social ethics,

are covenantal. The covenant was constituted between God and Israel as a nation, but its moral implications affected every individual within the nation.

This feature of wisdom in Proverbs is wholly in accord with the ethical emphasis of *ubuntu*. Much of the ethical instruction in *ubuntu* is given in the context of the nature of the community God has called into being. One possible way to assemble a substantial quantity of the moral requirements of God upon the individual would be to work through the wisdom teachings on Israelite society and produce appendices containing the logical implications for the individual.

For example, if God desired a society characterised by economic equality and compassion, then it required individuals to relinquish selfishness and resist the temptation to cash in unjustly on the misfortunes of a neighbour. If He wanted a society founded on justice and ordered by laws known and upheld, then it was up to the individual judges to act impartially and incorruptibly. One could continue through the whole spectrum of social characteristics, drawing on their individual characteristics.

Since anyone is able to draw his or her own conclusions, it would be tedious to wade through lengthy lists of results, which are in any event fairly obvious. It should be emphasised here that it is a matter of perspective: it is the nature of the community God seeks, which commands the kind of person He approves. Social and personnel experiences are inseparable in Old Testament wisdom and *ubuntu*.

We should be careful to stress that the preceding paragraph does not mean that such a community-orientated ethic in any way replaces the duty of the individual. The Old Testament provides a number of models of the kind of personal ethical life that is pleasing to God. It is not the multitude of actual individuals who populate the pages of Old Testament history that we have in mind, though these constitute a rich quarry for personal moral lessons. Our concern is rather with the character portraits which occur in various forms, giving an "identikit" picture of the typical qualities of the righteous person, as portrayed by wisdom and *ubuntu*.

## 5.5 The wise person

Old Testament wisdom, for all its international connections and assimilations, stands firmly within the mainstream of Israel's Yahwistic faith. As its theme verse insists, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov 9:10). Wisdom in Proverbs has a deep social concern, like the law and the prophets, but the bulk of its sayings are directed at the individual, to inform, forewarn, correct and guide in that path of life which is both pleasing to God and in the individual's own best interests.

Although the effective interest of wisdom and *ubuntu* appears to be man and his daily living, there is an interesting and indirect underlying God-centeredness. So much of the human character, behaviour and values which are commended do, in fact, reflect the known character of God, as revealed elsewhere in the Old Testament.

With regard to the personal ethics of wisdom it is evident that there is a strong element of imitation of the ways of God himself. A few examples are:

### 5.5.1 *'God created man in his own image. Male and female he created them.'*

Human sexuality is a dimension of the image of God in man, and is infinitely precious. The wise person, therefore, avoids any abuse of this trait, especially the harmful outcome of seduction and adultery (Proverbs 2:16-22; 5; 6:20-35; 7). Instead, he or she continually experiences fresh happiness and satisfaction in faithful marriage (5:15-19; 31:10-31)

### 5.5.2 *God as a father.*

The parent-child relationship is used as a figure for God's relationship with his people, with the result that a great deal of the instruction in Proverbs appears in a "father-to-son" form, which has a divine-human ambiguity about it. But there is nothing vague about the authority that is expected of human fathers and mothers, or the discipline and punishment which are affirmed as a function, not a denial, of familial love (Proverbs 13:24; 15:2; 19:18; 22:15). On the contrary, humility and



obedience are required of the “wise son” (13:1, 18); the sage feels the joys and pains of parenthood as keenly as God feels for his people (10:1; 17:21; 19:26; 23:24).

### **5.5.3 God is righteous**

God is righteous, both as kind and as judge. So Proverbs has many pronouncements on the individual who finds himself in either of those offices. Political and legal justice are of equal concern to the sage as to the lawgiver and prophet (Proverbs 16:10, 12-15; 17:15; 18:5; 20:8, 26; 22:22; 28:3, 16; 29:14; 31:1-9).

### **5.5.4 God is love**

God’s compassion and endless faithfulness were keynotes in the praises of Israel. Such qualities are to be reflected in human friendships. One of the most pleasing characteristics of the wise man of Proverbs is the quality of his friendship, the subtlety and maturity of his social skills. He knows the value of tact (15:1), confidentiality (11:13), patience (14:29), honesty (15:31; 27:6), forgiveness (17:9), loyalty (17:17; 18:24), considerate behaviour (25:17; 27:14), and practical help (27:10). And he knows the dangers of bought friendship (19:4), of gossip (20:19), anger (22:24), flattery (27:21) and misplaced sympathy (25:20).

### **5.5.5 God is compassionate and generous**

The history of Israel, including the delivery from slavery and gift of the land, proved the above. Practical concern for the poor was, therefore, placed on the shoulders of every Israelite. Many of the saying of the sage with regard to the delivery from slavery and gift of the land, proved to relate to compassion and generosity. Concern for the poor became the responsibility of every Israelite. Many of the sayings of the sage concerning wealth and poverty and economic justice have a modern application (Proverbs 11:24; 14:31; 17:5; 19:17; 21:13; 22:9, 16).

### **5.5.6 God is a worker**

God's limitless skill in creation (Proverbs 8) was transmitted in a measurable degree to man, his own image. Man too, is a worker by nature and purpose (cf. Proverbs 4). Correspondingly the virtues and rewards of work are set before the individual in Proverbs, contrasted with the negative attributes of the lazy. The lazy is more than just the laughing-stock, because his intentional, recurrent and senselessly rationalised laziness is a denial of his humanity and an insult to his Creator (Proverbs 12:11; 14:23; 18:9; 22:13; 24:30-34; 26:13-16; 28:19)

### **5.5.7 God speaks**

The above is one of the fundamental and most characteristic features of the God of Israel, and one of his highest gifts to humanity is the boundless power of oral communication. Words matter seriously to the sage, for he sees them as no less powerful vehicles of good or evil than deeds are. Consequently he has a plethora of advice for the wise person about his or her use or abuse of words (Proverbs 12:19, 22; 13:3; 14:5; 15:2, 23; 18:6-8, 20).

### **5.5.8 God is sovereign.**

God has given to each person freedom and responsibility in his or her moral consideration and choice, but in the final analysis it will be God's will that prevails (Proverbs 16:1, 9; 19:21; 21:1, 30).

The basic nature of wisdom is consequently to accept this ultimately incomprehensible truth, and to seek God's guidance in the humility of commitment and obedience (3:5; 16:3).

## **5.6 The relationship between African and Old Testament Proverbs**

The close resemblance between certain African and OT proverbs has long been acknowledged. However, only a few scholars have included any comparative material from Africa in their interpretation of OT proverbs. The first major study in this regard

was by Naré (1986), where Prov 25-29 was read in the light of proverbial material from the Mossi culture of Burkina Faso. Naré pointed out the existence of several formal and thematic resemblances between the two proverbial traditions; of special importance is a rather parallel concept of God.

A number of other topics were also discussed during the 1990s. The following paragraphs will provide a chronological summary of research done in this decade. The sociological and compositional background of Proverbs was investigated from different perspectives.

A considerable number of thematic studies were also published throughout the 1990s. Boström (1990), who argued that the concept of God forms an integrated part of the OT, investigates the theology of Proverbs.

Whybray (1990) investigated the question of wealth and poverty and argued that 10:1-22:16 and 25-29 reflect the social and ethical values of small farmers, whose risk of poverty was real, whereas 1-9 and 22:17-24:22 reflect an urban society with little concern for the poor.

Westermann (1995) argues that the early collections in Prov 10-21 and 25-29 have their background in the oral traditions of Israelite village communities, rather than in schools or the court.

McCreesh (1991) examines various examples of sound patterns or wordplay.

Golka (1993) criticises the traditional claim that OT proverbs originated as literary works in official circles (schools, court) during the monarchy, under influence of international (Egypt, Mesopotamia) wisdom literature. By comparing OT proverbs to proverbial material of traditional Africa, Golka concludes that OT proverbs are rather derived from a tribal society – whilst those of Israel originated in the period of the Judges. This enables him to refute three assumptions which have dominated traditional interpretation of OT proverbs; (i) that there were schools in ancient Israel, (ii) that a professional class of wise men taught in these schools, and (iii) that their teaching consisted of the moral standards of the civil service.



Snell (1993) reconstructed the history of the composition of Proverbs, emphasising the role of repetition of verses, half verses, and word combinations.

Whybray (1994b) argues that 10:1-22:16 and 25-29 are the core collections of the book, and that all collections reflect a long process of composition.

Washington (1994) also investigated wealth and poverty; in his case the subject was studied in both Proverbs and Amenemope, however, without drawing any detailed comparison between the two.

Brown (1996) demonstrated that the aim of the Bible's wisdom literature is the formation of the moral character – both for individuals and for the community. Brown traced the theme of moral identity and conduct throughout the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. He explored a range of issues that included literary characterisation, moral discourse, worldview and the theology of the ancient sages. He also examined the ways in which central characters, such as God, wisdom, and human beings, are profiled in the wisdom books and demonstrated how their characterisations impart ethical meaning to the reading community, both ancient and modern.

Brown provided a much-needed analysis of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament and explained what they teach about character. He offered intriguing insights as to the intended purpose of each of the wisdom books.

Baumann (1993) focused on Lady Wisdom in Prov 1-9; interpreted as a personification of the feminine, a heavenly being somehow parallel to Yahweh.

Estes (1997) takes Prov 1-9 as an educational handbook, attempting to describe the pedagogical theory and view of education that underlies these chapters. Estes organises the pedagogical data in Proverbs 1-9 logically and lucidly into seven categories: worldview, values, goals, curriculum, instruction, teacher, and learner.

Estes fails to connect 1:1 to chapters 1-9 and 3:19-20 to 3:13-26. This is symptomatic

of why Estes' argument fails in spite of its many commendable insights. Estes often treats individual verses outside their contexts to serve his own agenda. By "wisdom", Estes means the search for wisdom within the created order. But read as a whole, the fear of the Lord is the result of prayerfully and studiously accepting the sage's teaching (see 2:1-4).

Fox (2000) offers fair and balanced assessments of the character of wisdom literature and questions regarding the dating of the book as a whole and chapters 1-9 in particular.

Fox presses beyond the simple alternatives of "scribal school or village life" that so often characterises scholarly discussions of the material in chapters 10-29 and provides a richer account of the variety of sources that may have contributed to the formation of the book.

Fox identifies 10 major units in chapters 1-9 that he terms as "lectures". Each lecture consists of an "exordium", a "lesson", and a "conclusion". The exordium not only addresses and exhorts the hearer to remember the lecture's teaching, but offers a motivation "that supports the exhortation by extolling the teachings' excellence . . ."

Fox is concerned that once the figure of the strange woman is interpreted figuratively it may be expanded into a symbol of any evil with which one may wish to associate it. It could be true that on one level the strange woman is simply another man's wife, as Fox contends. But it is also true that this figure may at the same time be construed as a broader symbol of, say, the "way of folly" or discourses that compete with the text's patriarchal instructing voice; *and* that this is not a completely arbitrary "reading in" to the text.

For many years Old Testament Wisdom literature was a stepchild of biblical scholarship, receiving surprisingly little attention - at least when compared to for example the Prophetic or Pentateuchal literature. In recent decades, however, this has changed, and the increasing interest in Wisdom literature in general, and not least Proverbs, reflects the methodological and hermeneutical innovations of recent Old Testament scholarship.

## 5.7 A Preliminary Conclusion

In this study it was indicated that the concept of *ubuntu*, like many African concepts, is not easily definable. By defining an African notion in a foreign language and from an abstract as opposed to a concrete approach, one comes close to defying the very essence of the African worldviews, which could also in any event be particularly elusive. From my experience in studying the concept of *ubuntu*, it seems that for many African people *ubuntu* is one of those phenomena that one would be able to recognise when one sees it. Therefore, I only advanced some views which relate to the concept itself. In common with many authors who wrote on the subject, I would never claim the last word.

In terms of defining *ubuntu*, the concept has generally been described as part of a worldview of African societies and a determining factor in the formation of perceptions which influence social conduct.

It has also been described as a philosophy of life, which – in its most fundamental sense – represents personhood, humanity, humaneness and morality. This metaphor describes group solidarity where such group solidarity is central to the survival of communities with a scarcity of resources. Here one encounters the fundamental belief that *motho ke motho ba batho ba bangwe/umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* which, literally translated, means a person can only be a person through others. In other words, the individual's whole existence is relative to that of the group. This is manifested in anti-individualistic conduct towards the survival of the group if the individual is to survive. It is a basically humanistic orientation towards fellow beings.

It is consequently not sufficient to refer to the meaning and concept of wisdom and *ubuntu* merely as a social ideology. Wisdom and *ubuntu* are the very quality that guarantees not only a separation between men, women and animals, but the very fluctuating gradations that determine the relative quality of that essence. It is for that reason that we prefer to call it the potential of being human.

This harmony is achieved through close and sympathetic social relations within the group - thus the notion *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu/motho ke motho ka batho ba*



*bangwe*, which also implies that during one's life-time, one is constantly challenged by others, practically, to achieve self-fulfilment through a set of collective social ideals. Because Proverbs and the *ubuntu* worldviews cannot be neatly categorised and defined, any definition would only be a simplification of a more expansive, flexible and philosophically accommodative idea.

The meaning of wisdom and *ubuntu*, however, becomes much clearer when its social value is highlighted. Group solidarity, conformity, compassion, respect, human dignity, character formation and collective unity have among others been defined as key social values of both wisdom and *ubuntu*. Because of the expansive nature of these concepts, their social value will always depend on the approach and the purpose for which they are intended. Thus their value has also been viewed as a basis for a morality of co-operation, compassion, communalism and concern for the interests of the collective respect for the dignity of personhood, all the time emphasising the virtues of that dignity in social relationships and practices. For the purpose of an ordered society, both wisdom and *ubuntu* were a prized value, an ideal to which both age-old traditional Israelite and African societies found no particular difficulty in striving for.

This is not surprising, since these societies had their own traditional institutions, which functioned according to appropriate principles and practices. Of course, the influence and effect of various social forces on ancient Israelite and African societies throughout their historical development, cause modern day society to question the appropriateness of those original principles and practices.

Another feature of wisdom and *ubuntu* is that both are flexible, unformalised, reasonable and linked to morality. The flexibility of wisdom and *ubuntu* relates to the notion that they are law, without a centre. Based on this reasoning, the legal subject cannot be the centre of the law. This does not deny the importance of the legal subject in law. Law consists of rules of behaviour contained in the flow of life that in turn relates to the reasonableness of wisdom and *ubuntu*, even though they might be unformalised. In this sense wisdom and *ubuntu* are in search of discipline as the restoration of obedience.

In the final analysis it is important to note that there is a direct correlation between the definition and the execution of the commonalities between wisdom and *ubuntu*, instruction, discipline and worldviews on the one hand and on the life, access to the land and other resources, regional ways, the language and the culture of each specific group, on the other hand.

Both the justice and the validity of instruction are judged by the criterion of wisdom and *ubuntu*. A human being is commanded to become a human being proper by embracing wisdom and *ubuntu*.

Obedience has to be the embodiment of the fundamental ethical, social and legal judgement of human dignity and conduct upon which wisdom and *ubuntu* are based. Wisdom and *ubuntu* are the principles directing persons to act humanely and with respect towards others, as a way of demanding the same from them.

Worldviews are ingrained in the wisdom and *ubuntu* perspective on human existence. Wisdom and *ubuntu* regard the community as an integral part of everyday life that leads to a communal responsibility to sustain life.

Morality is the creation of the community and emerges from its social institutions. It is experienced within the community, with the result that the actions of an individual directly or indirectly affects the whole of society.

The affirmation of the wisdom and *ubuntu* perspective is twofold. It affirms that life's connections are understandable and every effort should be made to master those connections. There is a deep human yearning to know and to learn and it is a proper yearning that is at the heart of nurture in perspective.

## CHAPTER 6: Conclusion

### 6.1 Wisdom in dialogue with *ubuntu*: a new interaction

As I suggested in the first chapter of this dissertation, a dialogue can be established between wisdom in Proverbs 1 – 9 and *ubuntu*. In chapter 5 of this dissertation it was argued that interaction is possible between Old Testament wisdom and African *ubuntu*. This becomes evident from a close reading of Proverbs 1 – 9 and from a study of the correspondence between the worldviews found in ancient Israel and Africa respectively.

This study examined the concept of *ubuntu* as part of African worldviews and Old Testament wisdom as found in Proverbs 1 – 9. Both highlight the essential unity of humanity and emphasise the importance of constantly referring to the principles of obedience, sharing and cooperation in our efforts to resolve our common problems.

The importance of honour, as opposed to shame, in communities was argued in sections 2.4.3, 2.4.4, 3.8, 4.2, 4.4.2, 4.4.3 and 5.7 of this dissertation. I argued that wisdom and *ubuntu* presume that an individual's humanity is indivisibly tied up with other human beings. Hence, an individual is understood only within and through his or her family and community. In sections 2.2 and 3.2 it was argued that wisdom and *ubuntu* speak to the very essence of being human. When one wishes to praise someone highly, he or she is said to have *ubuntu*. This means that such a person is generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate. It also means that my humanity is caught up in and inextricably tied up with that of others. We say, "A person is a person through other people" (in Xhosa *Ubuntu ungamntu ngabanye abantu*, and in Zulu *Umntu ngumuntu ngabanye*). Which means, "I am human because I belong, I participate, I share."

Wisdom and *ubuntu* shed light on the importance of peacemaking through the principles of community, inclusivity and a sense of shared destiny between people (sections 2.3, 2.4, 3.8.1, 3.8.2 of this dissertation). They provide a value system for giving and receiving forgiveness. Wisdom and *ubuntu* offer a rationale for sacrificing



or letting go of the desire to take revenge for past wrongs. In short, these attributes could “culturally reinform” our practical efforts to build peace and to heal and educate our community.

Wisdom and *ubuntu* value communal life highly. Maintaining positive relations within society is a collective task in which everyone is involved, as was argued in sections 2.4.3, 2.4.4, 4.4.6 and 4.6.6. Wisdom and *ubuntu* developed mechanisms for resolving disputes and promoting reconciliation with a view to maintaining social cohesion and harmony. A dispute between fellow members of a society is regarded not merely as a matter of curiosity about the affairs of one’s neighbour. In essence, efforts to solve an emerging conflict should be shared among the whole of the community.

Reality’s infinite ambiguity is constantly compelling us to construct new and different ways of being and of understanding the world. I argued in sections 5.7 and 5.8 that *ubuntu* could improve our understanding of wisdom and Old Testament wisdom literature.

The dialogue between wisdom and *ubuntu* is especially challenging from an academic point of view. On the one hand, wisdom highlights valuable aspects of African ways of life, principles and ideas that are often overlooked or ignored. On the other hand *ubuntu* holds the promise of a nonwestern tradition that has been misread and marginalised in history, but that is reclaiming its place.

The dialogue between wisdom and *ubuntu* points to *ubuntu* as a hermeneutical key that can be used in the interpretation and understanding of wisdom literature across cultural boundaries. We should acknowledge the fact that academic hermeneutics remains a largely Western enterprise, dominated by the Western theological and philosophical tradition. This tradition is challenged increasingly by nonwestern theology.

The primacy of culture in Africa led me to suggest that African culture needs to be put to a thorough test within a framework called “*ubuntu* hermeneutics”. Hermeneutics here is understood as referring to the process of interpretation. Biblical hermeneutics, as a theological discipline, permits people to reinterpret scriptural texts from another

generation in the light of the culture of their own generation. The call for *ubuntu* hermeneutics in Old Testament wisdom literature is meant to demand a similar treatment of culture. *Ubuntu* hermeneutics therefore refers to the analysis and interpretation of how culture conditions our understanding of reality at a particular time and location.

*Ubuntu* as a hermeneutical concept for studying wisdom in Proverbs can be defined in four points:

1. In classical hermeneutics the aim is ultimately to gain to a better understanding of the text. This is an individualistic enterprise. *Ubuntu* as hermeneutical key has a communitarian approach.
2. Classical hermeneutics is focused on harmonisation. *Ubuntu* hermeneutics recognises differentiation.
3. Classical hermeneutics is seen as instrumental: the reader takes possession of the text, makes the text his or her own property. *Ubuntu* hermeneutics is relational.
4. Classical hermeneutics is based on a propositional and logical understanding of truth. *Ubuntu* hermeneutics is based on existential understanding of truth.

## **6.2 Criticism of *ubuntu***

If *ubuntu* is to be Africa's great gift to the global world of thought, it is a gift that comes primarily not from rural African people but rather from the academic and managerial codifiers who have allowed themselves to be selectively inspired by rural life, often ignoring the ever-present conflicts and contradictions, the oppressively immanent worldview, the belief in and accusations of witchcraft, the violence against women, the problem of street children, the constant oscillation between trust and distrust. The focus of *ubuntu* often is generalised, appropriating and representing only the bright side.

We should remember that we have hit here on a theoretical danger, that of intellectualising *ubuntu*. The use of *ubuntu* may tempt us to deny all other possible ways of identifying Southern Africans except at the most abstract, most comprehensive level of mankind as a whole: as fellow human beings. In the light of these moral and theological concerns, I feel justified in presenting an attempt at constructive criticism.

A moral community constructed by *ubuntu* and obviously succeeding is not the only modern moral community Southern Africa needs. The concept of humanity is by definition extremely wide, with many different applications in many different contexts. Looking for the meaning of *ubuntu* through etymological, ethnographic and historical procedures would be based on a misunderstanding of what *ubuntu* is and is meant for. The dialogue with Proverbs 1 – 9 can bring new depth to our understanding of *ubuntu*. Old Testament wisdom's appeal to *ubuntu* creates a position where *ubuntu* becomes more than an utopian ideal where the images of social life featuring in statements of *ubuntu* do not have to correspond to any living reality anywhere.

### **6.3 The hypothesis of this study and new hermeneutical insights**

I would like to restate the hypothesis of this dissertation: The traditional African concept of *ubuntu* shares many features with wisdom in the Old Testament, Proverbs 1 – 9; and a dialogue between *ubuntu* and Proverbs is significant for the study of wisdom literature. This dialogue indicates both continuity and discontinuity within the concepts of wisdom and *ubuntu*.

A close reading was used to interpret the particular words, images and organisation of the scenes or passages in Proverbs 1 – 9. Interaction between the worldviews of ancient Israel and Africa led us to further conclusions, identifying gaps in our knowledge and pointing to directions that could be followed in hermeneutics of which scholars have been unaware up to now. It also helped to sharpen the focus on wisdom by suggesting new perspectives of interpretation. The dialogue between wisdom and *ubuntu* leads us to fresh, exciting insights and a deeper understanding of issues that are of central concern in the field of wisdom theology research.



In setting limits for this study it was necessary to distil the principle questions that had become apparent in this hypothesis. It was argued in this study that the text is never fully revealed to any single reader, nor is the reader ever in full control of any text.

It was evident throughout this study that the principles found in *ubuntu* are not unique. As indicated earlier, they may be found in diverse forms in other cultures and traditions – most notably in Old Testament wisdom. Ongoing reflection upon and reappraisal of this notion of wisdom and *ubuntu* could serve to reemphasise the essential unity of humanity and could gradually promote attitudes and values based on the sharing of resources, cooperation, and collaboration in the resolution of our common problems. The hypothesis of this study thus is valid, and directed us to the following insights:

- Obedience and *ubuntu* in Africa may be clarified by the study of Proverbs in the Old Testament.

In order to gain understanding, the knowledge of Old Testament wisdom in Proverbs should build on practical knowledge in Africa, which in turn could enable people to obey the principles of *ubuntu*.

- Obedience is a means to an end: to achieve the principles of *ubuntu* in Africa and of wisdom in Proverbs.

Obedience is not a virtue in itself, but may help us towards comprehending what wisdom and *ubuntu* entail essentially.

- Obedience to *ubuntu* and wisdom provides ways of achieving many things in life, but above all it will be to one's benefit to adhere to the principles of *ubuntu* and wisdom.

Obedience to *ubuntu* and wisdom produces knowledge related to actual life opportunities, including a better understanding of interpersonal relationships and of living harmoniously with others.

- For the first time it became apparent how wisdom and *ubuntu* are interdependent, and also how obedience to these principles (wisdom and *ubuntu*) functions.

The dialogue between wisdom and *ubuntu* develops skills that could help the investigator towards understanding new hypotheses arising from the experiences that emanate from a better understanding of these two concepts.

- Obedience to the principles of wisdom and *ubuntu* enhances and sharpens the content and message they wish to portray.

Within the process of formative instruction these principles provide the environment within which wisdom and *ubuntu* become what they really are. The skills acquired through formative instruction arise naturally from the need to generate different kinds of knowledge for the benefit of society.

- The dialogue between wisdom and *ubuntu* creates the possibility of appreciating and perceiving the enigmatic depths of wisdom revealed in the Old Testament.

New perspectives on the interpretation of Proverbs 1 – 9 have become apparent from this study. It can already be seen that understanding this dialogue helps to generate new concepts required for analysing Proverbs, such as practical experience based on people's attitudes, behaviour and aspirations and on the historical relationships between people.

It has not been the objective of this dissertation to sideline or expropriate established Western oriented approaches. Rather, it has been to create awareness that such interpretation of the function of wisdom, together with widely held Western perspectives, should not be considered as a merely academic enterprise, one without relevance to everyday practical life. Applying other approaches alongside this perspective would open up further avenues through which those who have not done so before may appreciate more fully the function of obedience.

The topic of Biblical instruction should be addressed not solely as a question of knowledge, but also as a matter relating to attitudes and individual, emotionally shaped dimensions. I believe this could contribute to a more dynamic and comprehensive understanding of the Old Testament wisdom teaching and its significance in a world where cultural encounters, such as with *ubuntu*, have become an everyday experience.

#### 6.4 The contribution of this dissertation to the study of Proverbs and Old Testament theology

Biblical scholars still have trouble assigning a proper role to wisdom in their presentation of Old Testament theology (Murphy 1996:223). Whybray (1995:323) asserts that the distinctive character of Proverbs 1 – 9 was recognised from very early times. “Instead of the short proverbs predominant in the rest of the book, they consist almost entirely of longer poems. Three of these – 1:20-33; 8; 9:1-6 + 13-18 – are entirely unique in that they personify wisdom as a woman who claims to have been associated with Yahweh from before the creation of the world, builds a house and offers life and happiness to people.”

In Proverbs 1 – 9, wisdom theology is redefined from an *ubuntu* perspective. The dialogue between wisdom and *ubuntu* thus leads us to a new development within wisdom theology. It helps us appreciate the new emphasis on communality. This does not happen in isolation. *יְהוָה יִרְאֶת* is identified as the primal source of wisdom. It must be regarded, however, in combination with the emphasis on living in communion with others. The essence of the new understanding – an existential understanding of wisdom – leads us towards appreciating the interrelatedness between human beings. This becomes clearer, for example, in the invitation of Lady Wisdom to share a meal with her (Proverbs 9).

Perdue (1994) gives recognition to the fact that a theology of creation is the focal point of wisdom theology. Creation theology can be understood as deed/consequence theology, where the intimate relationship between experiencing divine awe and living in communion with others becomes evident. The dialogue between wisdom and *ubuntu* recognises that creation and providence cannot be marginalised, and can be a valued resource within Old Testament theology. This dialogue also redefines the deed/consequence or causality aspect of wisdom theology as the “goal” of the wise.

It is therefore my submission that a deeper understanding of wisdom in dialogue with *ubuntu* and of its role in character formation and Biblical instruction is indeed possible. This is achieved through an analysis of the content and functions of wisdom



and *ubuntu*, which is related to the comprehensive existential question of how people in general create their worldviews and interpret their reality.

With regards to natural theology the dialogue between wisdom and *ubuntu* leads us towards confirming that perhaps all theology is indeed both “revealed” and “natural”. Murphy (1996:224) believes that “biblical wisdom is a thematic expression of God’s revelation as mediated through creation. Humans live in a *de facto* supernatural order.” The dialogue between wisdom and *ubuntu*, as sketched above, can help us to better understand new perspectives on wisdom theology capable of dealing with the challenges in Africa.

It was not the aim of this dissertation to copy some previously developed theological approach from one context into another, but rather to stimulate creative hermeneutic thinking regarding African views on Old Testament wisdom literature. Therefore, the concept of worldview was used to study the intercultural comparisons between ancient Israel and Africa on different levels. Some comparisons are purely descriptive and analytic; others are evaluative and help the reader toward new hermeneutical insights into Proverbs 1 – 9. In this study I came to the conclusion that Afrocentric hermeneutics has the potential to be more responsive to the context of the Old Testament wisdom literature than Western theological exegesis has been.

Since the beginning of time every society has developed its own mechanisms and institutions for managing disputes in a way that preserves the integrity and fabric of that society. The worldviews of ancient Israel and Africa comprise of extensive ideas of instruction and order that influence every aspect of human life and interpretation of reality. Our worldview actually is the context in which our lives gain ordered significance, and it serves as a model or framework within which people explain their world. Worldview is as dynamic as the community in which it is expressed, a lifelong process that is expressed within a specific context through symbols, metaphors and religious teachings. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that cultural approaches towards managing disputes around the world could increasingly play a vital role in promoting peace and social order within communities and even among nations.

## 6.5 Enabling the church in Africa to articulate wisdom and *ubuntu*

The Bible is read through the lens of culture. The reality of African people is strongly founded on the interaction between scripture and life experiences, which are cultural. Our cultural heritage is indeed the basis for our common understanding of who we are and what that means. There has been increasing interest in the role that culture and worldview play in determining human relations, and in the social sciences there is a growing focus on the impact of a culture of obedience.

People derive their sense of meaning from what their culture teaches. What does it mean to be human? What is – or ought to be – the nature of human relations? These notions influence the attitudes and values that we choose to embrace, which in turn determine how we interact with others. Cultural attitudes and values, therefore, provide the foundation for the social norms by which people live. By internalising these cultural attitudes, wisdom and values, by sharing them with the members of their community, and by handing them down to the next generation, societies are able to reconstruct themselves on the basis of a particular cultural image.

When observing various parts of the world we are confronted by images and cultures of violence. Societies appear to be tearing themselves apart. The attitudes and values in these societies seem to be based on self-interest, private accumulation of wealth and the competitive drive for power and resources. This “cultural logic” promotes exclusion on a fundamental level and feeds a cycle of poverty, debt and economic marginalisation.

In the case of South Africa, a difficult political situation has been addressed over the last decade through various peace-building institutions and mechanisms for governance. These helped the people of this country to transcend the bitterness, hatred and suspicion of the past and to make a transition to a more stable – albeit still imperfect – political order. There is a growing interest in the cultural values and attitudes held by South Africans that have enabled a spirit of forgiveness and a willingness to move beyond the legacy of the apartheid state.

From the outset, Archbishop Desmond Tutu was convinced that as far as South Africa as a nation state was concerned there could be “no future without forgiveness” (Tutu 1999). Informed by his own adherence to the African worldview of *ubuntu*, Tutu, as Chairman of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, was able to provide leadership, advice and guidance to his fellow countrymen and -women during the difficult and precarious transition the country was undergoing.

A key step towards initiating the social reconstruction of communities would be to find a way for members of these communities to “reinform” themselves with a cultural logic, such as found in Old Testament wisdom and *ubuntu*, that emphasises the importance of the community and of obedience. This, in effect, means emphasising the importance of reviving cultural attitudes and values that could foster a climate within which peace can flourish.

I believe that the church should not confine itself to issues of inculturation and evangelisation, but should enter the public sphere more directly. From this point of view, the question is how one should take into account critical questions in Africa about resources (human and material), violence against women and children, xenophobia, HIV/Aids and well-being (or illness and disease)? A Christian (or any other) response is likely to be at best naive, at worst deceitful and hypocritical. A key point is whether churches or Christian groups in Africa have the will to respond adequately to these issues.

A system of restoring and healing justice reflects, in fact, a return to Biblical principles and practices of wisdom as encountered in Proverbs 1 – 9. Restoring justice is to obey the call to wisdom in the community and it entails taking care of the body of Christ. Of course, the church does not have a monopoly on acting justly or on loving mercy. But we who follow the call to walk humbly with God have to be ready to discern and acclaim it when we find God walking humbly with us, as he did in Christ Jesus.

The shift to obedience to the call of wisdom and *ubuntu* presupposes that different approaches to instruction within a community rest on ideologies advocating sound relationships among those concerned. In these circumstances the church has an



important role. *Ubuntu* may naturally fit into local Christians' understanding and may enable all people to come to a common interpretation of obedience to God. This approach must not be centred merely academically, as a hermeneutical key to understanding, but should present an opportunity to the church to share its experiences and to use suitable methods that comply with its ministry.

The emerging face of twenty-first century *ubuntu* and wisdom theology should be sought in a thorough grasp of the present challenges, plus a keen awareness of new and emerging waves and currents. It is heartening to note that churches in South Africa are already reassessing their objectives and redefining their agendas.

The issues addressed in this dissertation are far from complete. African churches need to develop the immense strides they have taken in Biblical hermeneutics. The issues of Africanisation, inculturation and identity will not disappear. The church in South Africa needs to continue addressing these issues. I would advocate that in addressing these established and still relevant agendas the church should do so on the basis of insights from such hermeneutics as I have sketched above.

## **6.6 Wisdom and *ubuntu*: an open-ended and ongoing process**

The dialogue between wisdom and *ubuntu* is in a sense timeless and a-historical. It is both an open-ended and an ongoing process, as well as an invitation to Christians in Africa to be creative. The question needs to be addressed whether the dialectical relationship between wisdom and *ubuntu* is one of "equal partners" or of "one criticising the other". The dialogue between wisdom and *ubuntu* indicates that, while wisdom could criticise *ubuntu*, the latter in turn has a great deal to contribute to our criticism of and reflection on wisdom in Proverbs 1 – 9. Therefore, both concepts function in a dual role of equal partners that simultaneously criticise one another. This has implications for individual believers on different levels: as parents, as the church, and within the educational system.

This leads to the question of the appeal of God's Word on our lives. We should keep in mind the nature of wisdom and *ubuntu* when considering this argument. For parents, wisdom and *ubuntu* uphold correct principles but do not offer absolute

insights or promises. It is not difficult to find children who have been taught well, but live in permanent rebellion against their upbringing. It is not difficult to find siblings who received virtually the same parenting, but then have exercised divergent life choices that they pursue with conviction. The pastoral purpose of Old Testament wisdom literature is to instruct parents in their responsibility for providing a strong moral foundation for the lives of their children.

The prevailing moral relativism does not South Africa's cause at all. We need some shared and abiding values that unite people into a community that will endure. The mark of a great nation is its capacity to wrestle with the moral challenges of the day and to lay the foundations for a sound society on which future generations can build. *Ubuntu* reflects the creed that has held many Africans to the ideal affirming that one's humanity is tied up with the humanity of others. Through obedience to Old Testament wisdom and *ubuntu* we may have the greatest gift to pass on to future generations: a more human, caring and loving society.

This is what wisdom and the Christian message of incarnation entail also for each individual. It proclaims that God is great not merely because he is powerful, but also because God has chosen to dwell among ordinary, sinful people, within ordinary communities. This is the hope and faith that Africa can share with the world.

## **Addendum: Topics for further research**

- ***Ubuntu and Agape: The obedient church in Africa.***

*Agape* is disinterested love. It is love in which the individual does not seek his/her own good, but the good of his/her neighbour. *Agape* does not begin by discriminating between worthy and unworthy people, or any qualities people may have. It begins by loving others for their benefit. It is love seeking to preserve and create a community. It is willingness to sacrifice in the interest of mutuality and a willingness to go to any length to restore community, like *ubuntu*. Is the church in Africa obedient to this command?

- ***Wisdom in Qohelet: Contradictions in society's principles.***

Qohelet suggests obedience and the fear of God as his main message to his readers. Despite, or even because of the 'emptiness' of life, such as our ignorance of the future, the injustices of life and the certainty of death, the good things that God grants should be accepted and enjoyed to the full. Popular society tends to misinterpret this truth.

- ***Wisdom and the Dutch Reformed Church: A comprehensive study of Christian religious education in South Africa.***

What is the church really teaching our children in religious education? Does this teaching equip them for the challenges of the present day South Africa? If not, should we not return to the Old Testament Wisdom literature as a means to instruct, educate and form our children's character?



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